The Plaid Dream

(Heroes of Catholic Education, Book Two)

J. N. Enriquez

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ISBN-13: 978-1974345090
ISBN-10: 1974345092

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Dedication

This book is dedicated…

To Saints Elizabeth Ann Seton and John Neumann, the patron saints of American Catholic Education.

To all young American Catholics who are either homeschooled, or attending non-Catholic public or private schools.

And to all American Catholic school students of both the past and the future.

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Prologue: A Faustian Bargain (Ryanite Chorus; June 22nd, 2011)

"Always have a plan to kill everybody you meet. They're just going to backstab you anyway."
-Halfrida Brotzman

An innocuous Spanish family villa rested atop an alpine plateau along the Andes Mountains. Its imposing walls and gates divided the estate from its sole lifeline to civilization–a winding asphalt road. The road itself stretched along miles of foothills to a sleepy resort town called San Carlos de Bariloche.

The morning sun rose. Loudspeakers mounted within and without the mansion's walls crackled. An old, scratchy recording of Franz von Blon's *Heil Europa* played. Past the twin front doors, a large lobby with tile floors and a gold-lined stairway. An oil painting of the estate's owner in an ϟϟ officer's uniform greeted visitors and family members alike as they entered.

The mansion's backyard had an Olympic-sized outdoor swimming pool. A big black L-Cross painted on the white floor of the deep end. Halfrida Brotzman, clad in a two-piece swimsuit, emerged from the water. Gasping for air, pulling the loose tresses away from her face, she screamed. "The Reichstag is on fire!"

Ulrich, her Cousin, dozed off whilst seated in a beach chair, a family photobook in his lap. Her screaming awakened him. "What the hell?" he murmured.

"Look out!" She pointed at two girls stepping onto the backyard patio. For the past several days, she had learned not to trust them.

Matilde 'Ostara' Geralyn von Brandt, the pale, platinum blonde, and purple-eyed goddess of terrorism, had come to grace the Brotzman family estate. Accompanying her was Duchess Perpetua Raynerson, a noblewoman from the Catholic School Underground's 'House of Raynerson'. Clad in women's two-piece business suits, the girls waved at Halfrida. Closing the glass door behind them, they trudged down the patio steps and marched toward the cousins.

Halfrida swam toward a ladder in front of Ulrich. "Why are they here?"

"How should I know?" he responded.

"Forget it!" She climbed out of the swimming pool. "Bring me a towel!"

Ulrich, grabbing a rolled-up towel from an adjacent chair, tossed it at her.

Halfrida caught it with both hands and wiped the chlorine-laced water from her fair body and threw it back at Ulrich. Arms crossed, she confronted the girls. Cousin Ulrich cowered behind her.

"Halfrida," Matilde said, smiling, holding out a hand to her. "We meet again."

"Lady Ostara…," Halfrida sneered, refusing to shake Ostara's hand, rolling her eyes away from Perpetua. "What brought you two here?" She pointed her finger at Perpetua. "I thought you were done dealing with my Cousin back in Panama."

"Who said we were?" Ostara retorted.

"And where are your manners?" Perpetua snorted. "It is unbecoming of a lady by being rude to my face."

Not even God Himself would give you a divine right to judge me, Ms. Carpetbagger! Halfrida thought, suppressing the pent-up rage boiling within. Her Prussian blue eyes glared at Perpetua's. "What do you want with me and my Cousin this time?"

She laughed her. "Cheer up, Halfrida. Matilde and I just wanted to offer you and Ulrich a limited, once-in-a-lifetime deal." She extended her arms and held out her hands. "All of us have something to gain by working together." She clapped her hands. "Trust is vital in any contract, any civilization such as ours."

"I-I don't want to know where this is going," Ulrich murmured. He whispered into Halfrida's ear. "Cousin, we should tell them to leave and never come back."

Halfrida's eyes rolled toward Ulrich, her head shaking. "Nein," she replied. "They may not be good people yet let them speak regardless."

"But Cousin…" Ulrich's head darted around the pool side, confused and conflicted.

"You heard me." She crossed her arms, tapping her bare foot on the wet concrete. She turned to the two girls standing in front of her. "Lady Ostara, Your Highness, make it quick. My Cousin and I don't have all day."

Perpetua, nodding her head, gestured Ostara to speak on her behalf.

"Jawohl." Ostara eyed Halfrida. "Ever heard of the Wolff Corporation?"

"An American pharmaceutical corporation with huge stakes in Las Vegas casinos," Halfrida spoke. "The multi-billionaire Wolff brothers, Howard and Herbert, run the company." Shaking her head, she sighed. "And yet few realize that their father's company was once part of IG Farben."

Ulrich emerged from behind her. "Wolff brothers, w-what about them?"

Ostara snickered, having heard Ulrich's voice. "I'm glad you worked up the nerve, Ulrich. I cannot be an evil person if I enjoy murdering the racially impure and those unworthy of life."

"I don't believe you or my Opa!" Ulrich's eyes narrowed.

"Anyhow, we all know Howard Wolff is the CEO," Ostara said. "Thing is, he's running for US President as a Republican nominee. It's…his way of 'atoning' for his father's wrongs against our predecessors, seventy-one years ago."

"What's the catch?" Halfrida yawned. *I have no time for history lectures, Matilde.*

"He's placed a hit on his grandson, King Percy Dwight of the Californian Empire, this Narco-Monarchy," Ostara said. "King Percy as the next Pablo Escobar is bad for Howard Wolff's prestige all around. Perpetua and I were asked to assemble an army of mercenaries to repossess IG Farben assets and patents."

Do I look like a mafia heavy? Her nose crinkled. "Go on…"

Ostara continued. "However, Perpetua and I have our own motives. The Californian Empire wants to trade 'Anomalies' – these marvelous metals and minerals – on the black market. Drug cartels, mafia families, terrorist groups, and tin-pot dictatorships are now waiting in line."

"And as a noblewoman from the House of Raynerson," Duchess Perpetua shouted, "It is unacceptable!" She spread her bent arm forward, pulling her hand away from her chest. "Nobody has a right to sell Anomalies without our approval!"

There she goes again. Halfrida rolled her eyes.

Ulrich shuddered. "If even a single Anomaly finds its way into the black market, anyone will have access to the deadliest weapons unknown to humanity!"

"That is where we come in." Ostara straightened her posture. "Halfrida, someone told me you have a knack for blowing stuff up. After Panama, Duchess Perpetua and I would like to employ you into our personal secret army." She grimaced at Ulrich. "Your Cousin included."

There's no way I'll work with Ms. Carpetbagger. Halfrida scoffed at the offer whilst exchanging menacing stares with Duchess Perpetua. "Who told you two about me?" she asked her.

"Was it my Opa, my grandfather?" Ulrich demanded.

Ostara said nothing. She tilted her head toward Perpetua and nodded.

"Your sissy twin brother, Harold," Perpetua said with a stern face and a wide frown. "With his effeminate looks and mannerisms, I'm starting to believe you might be the real…"

Anger consumed Halfrida. *For the last time, Your Highness, I'm not a boy!* She slapped the Duchess' cheek, the force knocking her to the ground.

Tears poured of Perpetua's eyes. "Why are you so mean to me?" she cried.

"Mein Gott!" Ulrich shouted at her, his fists clenched. "Stop trying to kill every single person you meet!"

"Duchess Perpetua insulted me with her presence!" she screamed. "She's no different than the kids who bullied your Cousin Harold when we were little!"

"Clear as holy water." Ostara snickered, squatting down next to Perpetua, helping her get back on her feet. "She deserves an apology, perhaps with interest."

Perpetua held her hands behind her back. "This is a great opportunity for both you and your Cousin. After all, we've got Wolff Corporation bonds with Harold's name on them."

Like a lawn chair, Halfrida folded to the girls. "Maybe there's no harm working with you two, if it means helping my brother," she grinned.

Ulrich tapped on her shoulder. "Are you sure about that?" he whispered. "I still don't trust either."

She winked at him. "Then trust me instead. This is only going to be a marriage of convenience," she whispered back. "All I ask is loyalty to my brother."

"*Natürlich*," he told her, "'A marriage of convenience.'"

From an office on the second-floor, a middle-aged man lingered behind a brown curtain, peering through a shatterproof window. It was Horst Brotzman, ϟϟ Colonel and grandfather of Ulrich. Blonde and well-bred, he had been stalking the four the entire time. When Halfrida shook Ostara and Perpetua's hands, he cracked a smile. "I always knew you were one of us, Halfrida…," he muttered.

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Part One: Ein Roman Voller Wirklichkeiten

(A Novel Full of Realities)

Chapter One: Grand Chessboard, Pt. I

(Renate and His Plaid Eminence; July 4th, 2011)

"It's freaking midnight in America! Today, our lives are more miserable than at any other time in our country's history! This is the nightmare we're now living in after voting Democrat!"

-Halfrida Brotzman

A lumbering passenger jet soared through a starry, moonlit night, thousands of feet above the waters of the Pacific. Scattered clouds floated in midair as the plane flew over them. One of the oblong passenger windows on the left-hand side of the business class section was not shuttered.

The lights above the passenger seat were cast on a teenage girl. Halfrida Brotzman stared at the window, sighing in boredom. A tomboy of 5'6, she had shoulder-length light brown hair, dark blue eyes, and a pale complexion. A smug grin widened across her pretty face. With the other passengers asleep and the flight attendants away from audible hearing, she had nothing to fear.

A tasty aroma wafted in the air around her. It brought her back to reality. A dinner meal was laid out on a moveable tray table above her lap. A three-course meal consisting of a medium-rare T-bone steak, salmon filet, a martini glass of jumbo shrimp, yogurt, jelly-filled pastry, and a glass of pomegranate juice.

Ulrich whispered to her. "Cousin Halfrida, you don't want to eat anymore?"

Halfrida looked away from the window. "No Cousin Ulrich," she told him. "There's something on my mind."

An ash-blonde, blue-eyed boy with pale complexions, Ulrich Brotzman sat in the seat next to hers. Feasting on his meal, he savored the moment and wiped the grease off his lips with a napkin. "*Was ist los*?" he asked.

"Come on, don't be like that." A mischievous grin appeared on her face. She looked over her shoulder and whispered into his ear. "You know the score about that deal we made back in Argentina, ja?"

Ulrich smirked. "Ja, ja." He nodded, chuckling. From a narrow space near his lap, he picked up a reddish leather photobook, and handed it to Halfrida. "I know you've been dying to get your hands on the family photobook, so here it is."

"If I get caught…" She took it from him.

"You won't," he warned. "Just be careful with it. My Opa will be looking for it, now that you have it."

Halfrida, holding it above her food, gawked at the photobook, entitled, *Gott Schütze die Brotzmans von Horst Brotzman* (God Bless the Brotzmans by Horst Brotzman). Opening it, she browsed through the glossy photos of herself, her twin brother Harold, and their eight cousins at numerous family gatherings.

One photo, labelled "Sommer 2010," reawakened awkward memories. Halfrida's eyebrows shot upward.

The photo depicted the ten Brotzman kids at a birthday party outside the mansion. In cursive, their names were written above their heads with a black Sharpie. Five boys named Bruno, Dieter, Fabian, Ulrich and Harold; five girls

named Adelwolfa, Heinricka, Käthe, Rosalinde, and Halfrida. As twins, Harold and Halfrida stood beside each other.

It also showed Dieter and Fabian pluck the brown wig off the head of 'Halfrida.' Ulrich and Bruno pulled 'her' skirt up to reveal boys' boxers. Heinricka and Rosalinde forcefully unbuttoned the shirt off of 'Harold', while Käthe and Adelwolfa pointed their fingers at 'his' lace garter belt and bra. Both twins' cheeks reddened as the photo was taken.

Halfrida rolled her eyes. *Dammit, I thought I burned this photo already!*

"I know what you're thinking," Ulrich voiced. "You want to burn that photo again." He stabbed a photo through a sliced piece of salmon and crammed it into his mouth. Chewing his food, he continued, "But last year's ancient history." He swallowed the chewed-up salmon. "We should instead focus on making Catholic education great again."

"Of course, but this photo's an embarrassment," Halfrida growled. She pulled the photo from the, settled the photobook on her lap, and proceeded to rip the photo to a million pieces.

"That wasn't the point of me showing that photo." Ulrich shook his head.

She turned her head to him. "Then what was it?"

"I wanted to remind you about Cousin Heinricka."

"Isn't she the family's computer-hacking sorceress?"

"Ja." He nodded. "You should know that I made arrangements to make her your double in our escape to the US."

"Are you sure your Opa, the old ϟϟ Colonel, won't notice your escape?" She stroked her chin, eyes staring at the window.

"He may be old, but he'll find out eventually."

"And what if he does find out?"

"Send him my message." Reaching into his pocket, Ulrich pulled out a small index card and gave it to Halfrida. Scribbled in his handwriting, the index had one simple message in *Sütterlinschrift*, a lost form of German cursive.

The black ink on the card had already bled through the paper. Eyes narrowed, Halfrida saw a simple warning in English. "'Don't stop us,'" she whispered, grabbing a piece of jumbo shrimp from the cocktail glass. She gave the index card back to Ulrich. "Sounds pretty vague."

"You think?" He took it from her and dumped it back into his pocket. "As for our beloved Cousin Heinricka: rest assured that the Americans won't capture her. Interpol may be a different story."

Interpol? The name took Halfrida by surprise. "What's going on with her?"

Looking over his shoulders for eavesdroppers, Ulrich whispered into her ear. "She was hired to engineer a doomsday logic bomb that almost brought down the Internet. The damn thing looked like it came from the plotline of a Richard A. Clarke novel." He pulled his head away from Halfrida and sipped on a glass of pomegranate juice.

She cackled with both hands over her mouth. "Either we're the stupidest or the most daring in our family's thousand-year history."

He rolled her eyes. "Alas, my Opa has billions of dollars and has never shown his face in public since the seventies." His chin tilted downward. "But don't you find it odd that Lady Ostara visited us alongside Duchess Perpetua Raynerson of the Catholic School Underground?"

"Now that you mentioned it, I did." She stroked her chin, eyes staring at the ceiling of their cabin.

"Ah, so we *are* on the same page." Ulrich smirked. "I had a feeling that my Opa may be pulling Ostara's strings for quite some time now."

"Huh?" she questioned, crossing her arms. "That's a little too far-fetched."

"Nothing is 'far-fetched' in our line of work, Cousin." Ulrich pointed his finger at her. "This world of ours was meant to be hidden. Power thrives from absolute secrecy." He grabbed a pastry from his tray and bit off half of it.

You're right, Cousin: who the hell am I to say otherwise? She sighed, resting her elbow on her armrest, her head leaning against the palm of her hand. "And here I was thinking my brother isn't only one who's paranoid."

"But we're playing a grand chess game with some violent, ruthless girls."

"I know," she yawned. "I've known that even before we accepted the deal."

"You don't get it." With his left hand, Ulrich held up four fingers. "Hannelore Bauer, Francine McAdams, Perpetua Raynerson, Lady Ostara…" He gulped. "They're not to be screwed like any other girl." He put his hand down. "I wouldn't be surprised if all of them were on my Opa's payroll."

Is that why he fears them and loathes his Opa? Halfrida stroked her chin. "Huh."

"Whether we make the right choice or not in that deal we made," Ulrich droned on, "God is still our judge, jury, and executioner."

Halfrida scratched an itch on her scalp. "What are you implying?"

"One wrong move could get us both killed."

She giggled. "Oh, that just makes our lives even more exciting. This is a game we're playing, and just like any other game, there are winners and losers."

"If you weren't my Cousin, Halfrida, I'd have sent you to the nearest mental hospital." Ulrich drank the rest of his pomegranate juice. He pointed at her meal. "By the way, are you going to finish that?"

Halfrida eyed the food. "It's all yours."

"*Danke*." Ulrich took the food away from his cousin's tray table and dumped them over his. He worked his way from the main entrée and resumed finishing the rest of his the desert. When he was done, he wiped his mouth with a few napkins and tossed at the empty plates.

A female flight attendant walking up the aisle next to the cousins stopped by them. She grabbed the cousin's plates and left.

"So," Ulrich asked, "What else is on your mind? We are on a plane heading to America – Los Angeles, to be precise. I'm sure you've got a lot on your mind."

Halfrida yawned. "For once in my life, I can finally trust my own family." She made eye contact with Cousin, smiling. "You, me, Harold, and Heinricka – four Brotzmans getting together is more than enough to destroy whole nations."

"Then be grateful that you have my loyalty, 'Prodigal Daughter,'" Ulrich said, calling Halfrida by her nickname. "Unlike the rest of the family, I am eager to help your brother's cause. Who doesn't want to make Catholic Education great again?"

"Sure thing, 'Your Plaid Eminence', my 'Brain,'" she answered. Halfrida had called her Cousin by his nicknames, 'His Plaid Eminence' and 'Halfrida's Brain'.

"Ei, thanks for the compliment." He cracked a smile. "Cousin Harold is pretty bright for our age, yet he lacks pragmatism. We're the only ones he can rely on to build this 'Greater American Catholic School System' (GACSS)."

"Yeah, and it won't be easy," she added. "That's why I think courting the favor of Hannelore Bauer and your old associates is our first move on this grand chessboard."

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Halfrida and Ulrich navigated the busy streets of LA in a Porsche 993 Turbo coupé, a 1995 two-door sports car based on the 911. The morning sun soared high along several scattered clouds in the skies above. With Cousin seated in the front passenger seat, Halfrida handled the steering wheel, her bare foot on the accelerator, a pair of wedge heel sandals strewn on the carpeted floor.

The transmission set to manual, she adjusted the gear shift according to every speed limit sign she encountered. The sun emerged from the skyline adorning downtown, its rosy fingers grazing the spotless windshield. Halfrida pushed her sunglasses up to the bridge of her nose.

The summer heat annoyed Ulrich. He stretched toward the air conditioning dial and switched it on. The Porsche pulled over behind a long line of cars at a busy intersection near the Koreatown district.

Tapping her fingers on the upper half of the steering wheel, Halfrida spoke. "Cousin, could you look into my handbag and find a stick of chewing gum."

"What do I look like, a *Kaugummisoldat*, a 'grass-chewing cow?'" Ulrich responded, shaking his head. "How unsophisticated of you."

Why did I even bother asking? Halfrida sighed. "Does chewing gum make me seem too American and not German?"

"A little, now that I think about it," he voiced.

"Never mind then." She stared at the red lights on the traffic light up ahead. Dozens of cars drove past the intersection on the other road. A swarm of pedestrians crossed the street in front of the Porsche and other cars. The lights stayed red.

"When will this damn light turn green?" she mused. Unlike clockwork, the red traffic lights went green. The cars in front of the Porsche drove off. Halfrida followed the road into Koreatown.

The neighborhood came across her as bizarre. Old art-deco buildings clashed against newer, more modern ones. A diverse melting pot of various ethnicities other than ethnic Koreans.

She stroked her chin, the other hand on the wheel. "Cousin, I feel like they're missing some fanatical North Koreans and pictures of the Glorious Leader."

"Are you stupid?" Ulrich frowned. "This is not East Germany, where neo-Nazis admire North Korea."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Forget it."

The unusual sights piqued Ulrich's curiosity. "But I must say." He peered out the window beside his seat. The unique sounds, aromas, and sights were something from a distant land. "Are there any German enclaves or communities in Los Angeles?"

"America defeated the Fatherland back in 1945, Cousin," Halfrida explained. "There is no '*Kleindeutschland*' (Little Germany) or '*Großdeutschland*' (Greater Germany) in LA. It's the same reason why pretty much everyone these days speaks English instead of German."

"Don't tell me you long for the good old days?" Ulrich shivered. "Are you as Nazi-like as the rest of the family?"

"No, I'm not!" She denied. "Oh, in case you're wondering, there's a nearby neighborhood called 'Little Tokyo'. We can go there after paying our little visit to Hannelore's mansion." She giggled. "For the record, it's not like visiting the real Tokyo, Cousin."

"*Ich verstehe*," Ulrich retorted. Unbeknownst to her, he understood what she meant. "But don't you find it weird how more and more illegal immigrants are pouring into America these days?"

Let me guess: Cousin Ulrich is secretly racist against the 'Latinos' of Latin America? Halfrida's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

Ulrich continued. "Everywhere we go, I see blonde, blue-eyed youths around our age." He glared at one such family of four on the rearview mirror. A mother and father in their mid-twenties with their infants strapped to a stroller.

"What are you implying?"

"They're roaming the streets with their parents, who're a couple years older than us. They come into the US by the millions, outnumbering every other immigrant group. They're fluent in German and English, incorporate German customs into American culture, and they always vote Republican."

"Cousin, I was afraid you were going to bad-mouth the 'Latinos' or 'Hispanics' from South America." Halfrida giggled. "Those people are the 'Reste', the Remnants of *Neudeutschland* (New Germany). They fled their '*Vaterland*' to find a better life here."

"Yet they lie to the world that they're Mexicans, Cubans, Brazilians, Columbians and so forth," he spoke. "Haven't you read the latest copy of *Catholic School Observer*? An article claimed by 2050, blonde, blue-eyed twins will be the new normal in America!"

"I mean, they're all illegal immigrants who jumped over the border with gold bars, automatic weapons, and a fanatical devotion to the Catholic faith."

He chuckled. "Thank God Republicans are no different than Democrats."

But isn't that hypocritical on the Republicans' part? She thought. "So what if most Americans will be forced to only 'press one for German' in 2050? Be happy that the future is bright for our Remnants comrades in the faith."

The mischievous grin on her face grew larger. "The American bishops welcome them with open arms, yet they're unable to help."

"That's where we come in?"

"No, that's where you come on, Cousin!" She laughed.

The car ride continued along a busy westbound road from Koreatown to Beverly Hills. Halfrida almost went in circles looking for the neighborhood where Hannelore Bauer's mansion was.

Bored, Ulrich leaned back on his seat and rummaged through his cousin's handbag. In it, he discovered an authentic-looking Pennsylvania driver's license bearing Halfrida's likeness. That, and the Porsche they 'borrowed' from a crowded parking lot at LAX fueled suspicions.

He turned to his cousin. "You never told me you had a license."

"Who said I had ever had one?" she replied.

"But you drive like you've got plenty of experience behind the wheel."

"That driver's license is fake. Look at the name I registered it under."

Ulrich glanced at the name. "Sharon Lockhart, who's she?"

"Some dumb blonde who got shot in a school shooting back in 2003."

"How's someone like you driving a Porsche with a counterfeit license?"

"Some friends of our family gave to me as a gift."

"Who was it?" Ulrich glanced at the windshield. "Hit the brake!" he shouted.

Halfrida faced the windshield. "Oh snap!" She slammed the brake as hard as she could. The Porsche came within mere inches of rear-ending a Cadillac SUV that had stopped at a Y-junction. The traffic lights went from yellow to red.

The Cousins made the sign of the sign of the cross. "Amen," they chanted.

She tilted her head at Ulrich. "Did I scare you?"

"Ja, a little bit." Ulrich breathed a sigh of relief. "As I was saying, how were you able to obtain a fake driver's license and a car like this?"

"First of all, this car belongs to the Bauers," she explained. "The driver's license was also a gift, but from another family with ties to the Republican Party. After what our family did for this country back in the forties."

"Weren't we at war with America back then?"

She nodded. "We were. The world is a different place now."

The lights turned green and the Cadillac drove off. "Uh-huh." Halfrida stepped on the gas pedal. The Porsche blitzed through the streets of Beverly Hills at the speed of the Blitzkrieg.

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Towards the nearby hillside, Halfrida drove the Porsche to the gates of a walled-off community perched atop a valley overlooking Beverly Hills. The automated gates welcomed her and Cousin Ulrich as if they were Hollywood royalty. Past the gates, she drove around the neighborhood's winding roadways as the roads ran up the hill.

The upper-class neighborhood was a hellish wasteland compared to the humble splendor of homeless camps, drug-infested neighborhoods, and thick

smog overhead. Huge sprawling mansions dotted the area, surrounded by their walls and gates to keep bored Remnants looking to loot and pillage.

Ulrich stuck his head out of the window, looking at the homes as the Porsche passed by them. "*Wunderbar*," he whistled. "It's almost like that one American TV show where this camera crew invades some rich celebrity's home."

"I know, right?" Halfrida said. A large three-story mansion of Mediterranean architecture appeared on the left-hand side of the car. It sat on the summit of a thirty foot hill. With the building on the corner of her eye, she pulled her foot away from the gas pedal.

She steered the vehicle leftward on a concrete road and followed it. The road led to the summit and ended at a wide multi-door garage next to the mansion. She applied the brake and parked in front of the mansion.

"Here we are," Halfrida declared. She shut off the engine and pulled the laser-cut key from the ignition, opened the door and got out. She grabbed her wedge heels from the floor of the driver's seat and strapped them back on.

Ulrich tugged the leather straps of his cousin's handbag. He gave it to her.

"*Danke*." Straddling the handbag, she and Ulrich strolled to the front porch.

At the porch, Ulrich pushed the doorbell. A loud ringing bell echoed.

The twin gold-lined doors swung open, revealing a tall eleven year old girl. It was Hannelore Elvira Bauer. A redhead of 5'8 with freckles and a pale complexion, Hannelore, had a gray right eye and a green left. She had met Halfrida in Argentina days prior.

"Guten Morgen, Fräulein Bauer," Ulrich greeted.

"Hello," Hannelore responded.

"Morning Hannelore," Halfrida said.

"Hey Halfrida," Hannelore replied.

"Listen, we came as fast as we could, but the highways in this city are like a poor imitation of the Fatherland's *Autobahn*," she apologized to her.

"You don't have to be sorry, Halfrida," Hannelore said. "As long you and your Cousin are with us, that's what matters." She stepped away from the doorway and motioned them to enter the mansion.

Halfrida and Cousin Ulrich stepped into the mansion. Hannelore closed the doors behind them. The foyer and adjacent rooms lacked any furniture or fixtures mounted on the blank walls. Instead, the two cousins saw stacks of unopened cardboard boxes lined against the walls.

Ulrich held his hands behind his back. "Fräulein Bauer," he asked, "Did you just move in here recently?"

"Why yes," Hannelore said. "It's one of many properties that I now own. Thanks to a premium down payment, I was able to buy this dead guy's place."

"Who was it?" Ulrich pondered.

Hannelore shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, some washed-out child celebrity from the Eighties."

"Nice!" Halfrida gave her a high-five.

Hannelore chuckled. "Anyway, shall we talk more in the backyard?"

"Jawohl," Ulrich replied.

"Sure thing," Halfrida answered.

The mansion had a spacious swimming pool in the backyard. Hannelore was hosting a private pool party prior to the cousins' arrival. Various child celebrities in the entertainment industry mingled and rubbed shoulders with other equally renowned youths by the poolside. Some jumped into the pool, splashing water all over the place, while the rest swam in the water.

On the patio, someone was kind enough to leave a glass pitcher filled with lemonade and three glass cups. Lemon slices and ice cubes floated inside the pitcher. The pitcher lay in the middle, the three cups in front of each chair.

The backyard patio door opened. Hannelore stepped out of the mansion with the cousins in two. The wooden planks creaked as she led them to an unoccupied table halfway across the patio. She pulled up a seat next to the table.

The cousins did the same. Halfrida set her handbag aside on the fourth chair and scooted into the table. She took turns with Ulrich and Hannelore pouring lemonade into their cups. Sipping her cup, she took a moment to observe the youths congregating around the pool. A handful of them were familiar to her. "These youths," she told Hannelore, "Do you know any of them?"

"Yes," Hannelore answered. "Your Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka, along with me and the others who're here, were involved in the 'Great Panama Heist.'"

Whoa! Halfrida's jaw dropped. "You're serious?" She pointed at Hannelore. "You guys and my Cousins were involved in that big bank heist in Panama City two months ago?" She held up a clenched hand and pointed her thumb at the doorway. "Get out of here!"

"She's not joking," Ulrich whispered to her.

"That can't be true," she questioned. "A bunch of youths robbing billions of dollars from wealthy people in a tax haven is way too far-fetched. Hell, the heist is still all the rage on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC these days!"

"It's still the truth, whether you like it or not." Hannelore crossed her arms and sighed, rolling her eyes. "But you know what? I wasn't exactly on good terms with Duchess Perpetua, the ringleader of this group of misfits, anyway."

She eyed Halfrida. "If working with you, your Cousins and your twin brother is better than working with power-hungry noblewomen and a neo-Nazi terrorist, I'm all for it."

Ulrich turned to her. "What do you think, Cousin?"

"Like I said," she reminded him, "She's one of us, I just know it."

"I hope so," Ulrich murmured.

Halfrida and Hannelore got up from their chairs and shook each other's hands. "You should introduce me to the others, Hannelore."

"Why wouldn't I?" Hannelore replied. "Come on, let's go."

"That was quick and easy," Ulrich mumbled.

"Of course it was," Halfrida told him. "My brother is a, um, 'fan' of hers."

Chapter Two: Grand Chessboard, Pt. II
(Ryanite Chorus; July 4th, 2011)

"If this group isn't a 'marriage of convenience', I don't know what is."

-Hannelore Bauer

Far from any normal pool party, the Brotzman cousins, Hannelore and everyone else in the backyard were all part of a secret, advanced civilization independent of every nation on Earth. Nobody talked about that civilization to outsiders, let alone sharing their closest secrets with one another. Everyone had come to despise that cynical mystery novel detective tasked with unraveling all the mysteries.

Lady Ostara lay nude on a poolside chair, sunbathing and sipping on a martini. This morning's weather was perfect for sunbathing and reading her 'Bible'. Setting the martini glass on a small table beside her, she grabbed a signed copy of *Mein Kampf* and began reading.

Duchess Perpetua, clad in a two-piece swimsuit, was seated upright on an adjacent poolside chair, her back against Ostara. She highlighted passages of Zbigniew Brzezinski's book, *The Grand Chessboard.*

"You should get naked, Your Highness," Ostara said. "Sunbathing can help prevent tuberculosis and rheumatism. And we're both *Mädel* ('girls') so there shouldn't be problem."

Putting the book and the highlighter away in a tote bag, she turned to Ostara and sulked in disgust. "Matilde, for the love of God, put some damn clothes on! I can't stand looking at you like that!"

"Does it matter?" Ostara sighed.

"Unlike you, I don't swing that way," Perpetua snapped. She turned her whole body around and pointed at a group of six playing chess inside a gazebo on the other side of the backyard. "I don't want you or anyone else to see me naked."

A short, stern-faced boy with brown hair and eyes approached the girls with an ice-filled glass and a bottle of Scotch. He settled the tray on the table and poured some Scotch into the glass. "As you requested, Lady Ostara," he spoke in a New Jersey accent, "A drink for Her Highness." He gave the glass to Perpetua.

Perpetua sipped on the beverage and held onto the glass with both hands. She sprayed the drink all over Virgil. "Yuck! The taste is terrible!"

Virgil wiped away the spit and Scotch all over his face with his bare hands.

"Danke Schön, Herr Leutnant…'Virgil?'" Setting her book down on her lap, Ostara eyed the boy. "Or should I refer to you as 'Herr Sapienti?'"

"Just call me Virgil." As Ostara's personal slave, he bowed his head in submission. He was a disgraced Lieutenant in the Independent Dweller Army (IDA), the armed forces of one of the Underground's closest allies. "I'll be in the bathroom if you need me." He walked away.

Ostara reread her favorite passage in *Mein Kampf*, highlighted in yellow. In it, Hitler compared the mixing of Aryan and non-Aryan blood to the temptation of

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. '*For the original sin committed in Paradise has always been followed by the expulsion of the guilty parties*', he wrote.

Perpetua glanced at the cover of *Mein Kampf*. The Führer's fiendish blue eyes stared back at her. "I can't believe Emperor Bernard, my uncle of all people, decided to have this alliance with your puppet-master," she voiced. "The Underground spent eight years destroying you people in the Otherworld. We should have killed every last one of you Remnants!"

"Alas, the 'Rosy War' was never a just war." Ostara flipped through several pages to the next chapter. "Why did your family fight my people anyway?"

"To prevent Nazism from threatening Earth again," Perpetua said. "The Rosy War was inevitable. It was going to happen anyway."

"My puppet-master propped up the National Socialist regime in Neudeutschland for a reason." Ostara grimaced. "He wanted to secure the existence of our people and a future for White children. What's wrong with that?"

"You freaking Remnants are all the same! Nobody likes you people because all of you want Hitler to come back!"

"There's nothing bad about him or National Socialism."

"Listen, I'm a noblewoman of high standards," Perpetua bickered. "I may be an equal opportunist, but even I know where to draw the line." She poked her finger at Ostara's forehead. "If it wasn't for my uncle, I would've had you killed for burglarizing my family's Imperial Palace."

"Once again, here you are, relying on the will of His Greatness." Ostara swiped Perpetua's finger away from her forehead. "Emperor Bernard is just a mortal who fought during the Rosy War. Learn to think for yourself for once!"

"His Greatness is my role model from childhood," Perpetua spoke.

"Mass murderers like him aren't good role models." Ostara closed her book.

Perpetua's nose crinkled. "Neither is yours! Stop insisting that Adolf Hitler was a benevolent man who wanted to make the world a better place! He wasn't! All he cared about was absolute power, pure and simple!"

"Hitler was defending the German people from a Jewish conspiracy!"

"That's just propaganda drummed up by Holocaust revisionists!"

"Nein, it's the truth!" Ostara sat upright and leaned forward. "Admit it, Perpetua: neither of us can be seen as 'heroes' or 'villains'. Same goes for the Brotzmans." She pointed her finger at the Brotzman cousins and Hannelore at the backyard patio.

"Either way, it's about damn time they showed up!" Perpetua wrapped her hands around her waist. "What took them so long?"

Ostara sighed. "I swear: Halfrida and Harold are going to refight the Rosy War on some foolish quest to 'make Catholic Education great again.'"

Perpetua scoffed. "Oh yeah?" She snickered. "Let the Ryanites fight." She cracked her knuckles. "I'll steamroll their stupid asses into submission any day."

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A small saucer-shaped flying disc levitated thousands of feet in the air, sporting a dark-gray livery and a stylized Swastika. A ball-shaped underside opened

to reveal camera lens protruding outward. It snapped several photographs of Hannelore and the cousins walking away from the patio table before zooming away to a cigar-shaped zeppelin hovering above. The flying-disc flew into an exposed opening on the zeppelin as it disappeared into a looming white cloud.

Hannelore treaded down the wooden patio steps. She escorted the cousins along a concrete footpath past a field of grass to the poolside across the backyard. The Brotzman cousins trailed behind Hannelore. Halfrida whispered to Ulrich. "Cousin, do you know all of these people?"

Ulrich, his head facing hers, nodded. "Ja," he replied. "Unlike you, I've been studying these people for over a year, their rap sheets thick as New York City phonebooks."

"Pfft," she said, "How sure are you?"

"Okay," he admitted, "Maybe some of them, but not all."

I thought so. Halfrida grinned.

At the poolside, the cousins and Hannelore toured the area around the pool. They stopped at the right-hand side, not far from a teenage couple around Halfrida and Ulrich's age. A chestnut-haired boy and an ash-blonde girl lay on separate pool chairs beneath a large umbrella, sipping fruit cocktails through bent straws. Gazing at copies of *Catholic School Observer*, a Ryanite bimonthly fanzine, they paid no attention to Hannelore or the cousins.

"Drusilla, Francine!" Hannelore whistled and waved her hand at two girls playing polo in the pool, walking toward the edge of the poolside.

The cousins parted ways with Hannelore and approached the couple. Halfrida gestured Ulrich to introduce herself to the two. "Henry MacDonald, mayor of Wonderland," Ulrich spoke before turning to the girl. "Nadine Bianchi, Henry's fiancée."

The couple pulled down their fanzines. "Ah," Henry said, smiling, "Ulrich Friedrich Brotzman!" He got up and embraced him. "Nadine and I are grateful to see you again!"

Nadine exchanged silent stares with Halfrida. "Who's she?" she asked Ulrich.

"My Cousin Halfrida Renate Brotzman," Ulrich answered. "Long story short, she's the twin sister of Harold Sebastian Brotzman." He tapped on Halfrida's shoulder. "You know who Harold is, right?"

Nadine nodded. "Why wouldn't we?"

"You're the twin sister of Harold Brotzman?" Henry told Halfrida.

Halfrida said nothing. She crossed her arms, her head turning away from the couple, eavesdropping on Hannelore's conversation.

"Is she the quiet type?" Henry whispered to Ulrich.

Cousin Ulrich shook his head. "Nein, nein," he responded. "My Cousin is a bright and special girl. She has a habit of observing things, doing things in areas where others had failed."

"Reminds me of Harold, or so I heard." Henry grimaced, eying Halfrida. "Maybe he does have a twin sister after all." He turned to his fiancée. "Wouldn't you agree, Nadine?"

"Who knows?" Nadine shrugged her shoulders. She picked up her fanzine of *Catholic School Observer* and breezed through a couple pages to an explosive headline story about a White Nationalist terrorist organization. "We Ryanites and the rest of America are living in interesting times."

The girls talking to Hannelore piqued Halfrida's interest more than Henry and Nadine. She nudged Ulrich's upper arm with her elbow. "Hey, can we get back to Hannelore? These two sound like they came from *Fame and Honor*."

"That's because the author wanted us to have a brief cameo in *The Plaid Dream*," Henry voiced. "To him, he feels that we're potential bureaucrats in your brother's future plans."

"Then I'll let the author know you guys failed to impress me." Halfrida strutted away. "Let's go, Cousin."

Ulrich shook Henry's hand. "Could you do me a favor?"

"I'm listening," Henry said.

"Send Hannelore a map of the tunnels and caverns in Wonderland. My Cousin Harold will be paying a visit to Wonderland in the near future." Ulrich moved several paces away from Henry.

"Is that all?" Henry asked him.

Ulrich halted and turned around. "For now," he answered.

Halfrida hollered at him. "Stop dawdling, Cousin!"

"Be right there!" He rejoined his cousin at her side.

"MacDonald and Bianchi are their names, huh?" Halfrida crossed their arms. "I've heard about their grandparents. They were financiers for some American Catholic political party that vied for power during the War."

"So you knew them?" he tilted his head to the side.

"Ja, our family was working with five other families to help the GOP dethrone FDR from the White House in the 1940 Presidential Election."

"The 'Raynerson-Nazi Affair?'" Ulrich blurted.

She cracked a smile. "Yeah."

Another girl screamed at top of her lungs in a Southern accent. "I'm not racist! I've got nothing against blacks or Muslims!"

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"That's so racist, Francine!" Hannelore squatted on the wet concrete by the poolside, laughing. "Is this what happens when you start snorting Columbian coke every other Saturday night?"

"I'm not racist! I've got nothing against blacks or Muslims!" Francine screamed, her wild eyes shifted between Hannelore and the other girl, a prepubescent redhead. "Drusilla, wouldn't you agree with me?"

Drusilla, floating in the deep end beside Francine, shook her head.

"Stop playing the race card at your first African American President!" Hannelore scolded.

"Why?" Francine raised her voice. "Barack Obama is a Muslim born and raised in Kenya, an African country!"

"Does it matter if our President is black or white?" Drusilla voiced. "Are we going to have this conversation again after a woman becomes President?"

"As long as she's American and not a Democrat, I'm totally fine with a woman as President," Francine replied.

"There she goes again…," Hannelore whined.

The Brotzman cousins went up to Hannelore and stood on her left. Halfrida glanced at the three girls. "Tell me, which one of you was playing the race card?"

Hannelore and Drusilla pointed their fingers at Francine. Francine pointed her fingers back at them. "It was her!" they answered in unison.

"So what's the problem?" Halfrida asked.

"Well," Hannelore clarified, "Francine Cardington-McAdams claims that Obama is Kenyan Muslim who wasn't born in Hawaii."

"I'm just saying that this might be part of a much bigger subplot in *The Plaid Dream*," Francine chimed. "So I was thinking…"

"No, stop right there!" Halfrida interjected. "Those conspiracy theories about Obama aren't true, nor are they new. You know, back in the Thirties, people said the same thing about FDR. They thought Roosevelt was 'Rosenfeld', a Communist Jew who also wasn't born in the US."

Angry at Halfrida, foaming at the mouth, Francine rambled. "Who cares! The Democrats want a new Columbine-style Reichstag Fire, where hundreds of high schoolers are slaughtered by gun-obsessed weirdos like you!"

"Why on Earth would I want to shoot up a school?" Halfrida screamed. "Are you on drugs or something?

Francine blushed. "Yes, I'm high on some meth, coke, and oxycodone!"

"Go figure," Halfrida murmured.

"Oh, I don't know," Francine ranted, "Maybe you and your twin brother are born-again Nazis who worship Hitler! I bet you also think Nazi Germany had a great human rights record, am I right?"

"Nein, you're dead wrong," Ulrich snorted, intervening on Halfrida's side.

Halfrida sighed. *This girl is getting on my freaking nerves!* She reached for her trusty handgun, a .40 S&W Cz75 Tactical Sports, inside her handbag.

Without warning, Cousin Ulrich wrapped his hand around her wrist.

"Let go of me."

"Leave her alone. She isn't worth getting a bullet to the head."

"If you insist…" Halfrida pulled her hand away from her handbag.

"I swear, the Democrats are going to take our guns and then they're going to have their way with us! It's written in the Bible!" Francine plunged into the water and swam on over to the other side, the dark side, of the pool.

Hannelore rolled her eyes. "God, listening to that girl gives me a headache!"

"This is why we should always say no to drugs," Halfrida told the others.

"And say yes to tax cuts," Ulrich added. He and the girls laughed.

Drusilla latched onto the stainless steel ladder and climbed out of the pool, her soaked swimsuit spilling chlorine-treated water all over the concrete. She pulled a few loose reddish tresses away from her freckled forehead, wiping away

drops of water rolling down her cheeks. "You must be Halfrida Brotzman." She held out her hand to her. "Name's Drusilla Price."

Halfrida shook her hand. "Ah, nice to meet you."

"Same," Drusilla retorted.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"What's that?" asked Drusilla.

"How old are you?" she pondered.

"Ten." Drusilla held up all the fingers in her hands.

"So what's your story?"

"I'm a girl genius in 'Miniaturized Armored Fighting Vehicles,'" she whispered back. "You know, 'MAFVs.'"

"I see," she muttered. "My Cousin has had prior experience with 'Aerodyne-Wings' (A-Wings), the MAFV's aerial cousin. Last year, I think he shot down seventy other fighters in all of his sorties."

"But not many preteen girls are as enthusiastic about MAFVs as Drusilla, Halfrida," Hannelore said. "She's like a walking encyclopedia about MAFVs."

"Is there something else we need to know about her?" Halfrida asked.

"She was only raised by her mother," Ulrich interjected. "Her mother gave birth to her not long after graduating from high school."

Halfrida's jaw dropped. "Wait." Her eyes narrowed. "What happened to her father?" She turned to Ulrich.

"There wasn't a father." Ulrich bit her tongue. "Well, I'm sure she had one, but it's a mystery." He scratched his head.

Hannelore snapped her fingers. "Right…" She pointed at the six boys inside the gazebo. "Do you know those guys? They kept telling me that they know you on personal terms, Halfrida."

"I don't." Halfrida shook her head. "It doesn't hurt to introduce myself, no?"

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In the gazebo, four teenage boys huddled around two boys sitting at a small table, playing chess. Individual chess pieces, hand-crafted out of either marble or black onyx, were being moved up and down the board.

A boy in a formal khaki military tunic and trousers pushed a rook up the chessboard. His rook came within three squares away from the other boys' king. "Check!" he declared, wiping the sweat falling down his acne-covered forehead.

"Go get him, Marcus!" one of the other boys rooted for him, raising a clenched fist and red Solo cup of apple juice on the other.

Another raised his Solo cup. "You can do it, Lance!" He patted on the shoulder of the other chess player, a red-haired boy with freckles, gray eyes, and a pale complexion.

"I know, Boss Eddie," Lance said, moving his king piece back one square.

Marcus slid the rook up another square. "Check!"

Lance laughed. "Dude, are you sure about that?" Cracking a smile, he gestured at his knight piece, left in the right position to move in for the kill.

"Damn!" Marcus slammed a clenched fist against the table. His and Lance's chess pieces tumbled on the board. A few were even tipped over.

"Serves you right!" Lance grabbed his knight piece and knocked Marcus' rook off the table. He turned to the boy hunched over his left shoulder. "Hey Frankie, give me some space and pick up his other rook."

Francis Leblanc guzzled down his cup of apple juice. "Alright." He picked it up and gave it to Lance.

"Thanks." Lance swiped it from his hand.

Cousin Ulrich strolled into the gazebo with Hannelore, Drusilla, and Halfrida in tow. "Oh, it's you guys again," he called out.

From left to right, he exchanged glances with each of the six. "Long time no see, Nathaniel, Marcus, and Francis," he greeted the three on the left side of the gazebo. He turned to the right. "Same goes for Victor, Eddie, and Lance."

"Who invited the Brotzmans?" Marcus asked the others.

Lance eyed Marcus. "What did you say?"

Marcus repeated himself in a brash tone. "Who invited the Brotzmans?"

"That's a great question," Nathaniel added.

"True, true." Francis gave Nathaniel a high-five.

Halfrida whispered into Ulrich's ear. "Do you know these guys?"

Ulrich looked over his shoulder and whispered back. "Ja, are you done piecing together the puzzle inside your head?" He threw up his hands. "We were all involved in the Great Panama Heist!"

She giggled. "You're kidding. Don't ever joke about stuff like that."

He shook his head. "Listen to me, Halfrida: we were the ones who robbed that bank in Panama City." Ulrich placed his hands over her shoulders and shook her back and forth. "None of us are making this up!"

"Hold on," Halfrida said, "Are you serious?"

"Where have you been this whole time?" he responded.

"How the hell am I supposed to figure that out?" A deluge of questions flooded Halfrida's mind. Before Ulrich could respond, she said, "Don't answer that. I think I now know what we're getting ourselves into."

"It's a little too late for that, don't you think?" Ulrich slapped his hand against his forehead. "I'm begging you, Halfrida, don't be as dense as Harold. Do us all a favor for once."

"Fine," she said, "But I want to some answers first. Why were you involved in that heist?"

"Look, it was an offer I couldn't refuse!" Ulrich snapped. "If I didn't accept the offer, I would have been buried six feet under!"

He droned on. Maybe I don't enjoy imposing the will of power-hungry noblewomen on others! Perhaps there's something wrong about running guns, drugs, and stolen cash for neo-Nazi terrorists!"

"Oh, give us a break, Ulrich!" Eddie told him. "We all wanted in on the action. Who the hell gave you the right to judge all of us?"

"So who am I to believe," Halfrida yelled, "My Cousin or you people?"

Hannelore spoke on everyone's behalf. "Halfrida, I think your Cousin has a point. If this group isn't a 'marriage of convenience', I don't know what is. Even we don't want to get in bed with Ostara or Perpetua."

"Alright," Halfrida spoke to her, "If all of you were so unwilling, why let yourselves be played for suckers? All of you could have said 'no' or 'nein.'"

"I…I-I guess we were *afraid* of those two, Perpetua and Ostara." Hannelore tilted her chin down.

"Then all of you should consider my agenda for once, starting with my Cousin." Halfrida pounded her clenched fist against the palm of her other hand. "How about it, Ulrich?" She turned to him. "Are you still with me or against me?"

"I don't know," Ulrich answered. "Sometimes, you're no different than Ostara or Perpetua."

She pointed her finger at him. "The ends always justify the means. Again, I ask you: are you with me or against me? There is no third option."

All eyes were focused on Ulrich. Sweat poured down his forehead. He bit his lip, his hands pulled to the back of his waist. "Ja." He bowed his head. "You still have my loyalty, Halfrida."

"Good choice." She patted his cheek, smiling. "At least I now know who my friends are." She eyed Perpetua and Ostara while they were swimming in the pool with Francine. "And through my friends, I also know who my enemies are."

Chapter Three: The Crossfront Coup (Ryanite Chorus; July 7th, 2011)

"Sex, lies, scandals, coups, heists, and debunking conspiracy theories. This chapter has it all!"
-Fake News

The Dweller World was made up of huge subterranean caverns many miles beneath the United States and Canada. These caverns were connected to one another by networks of road and rail tunnels. A few, like the 'Waters of Rebirth', had entire areas completely underwater. The largest one spanned the entire breadth of the West Coast US, fifteen miles below the surface.

Thirty Dweller cities were situated along the massive waterfront. One of them, Concord Harbor, was the Californian Empire's capital, east of San Francisco. Huge ceiling lights lit up the cities up and down the cavern while morning dawned on the surface.

The bustling streets of Concord Harbor were no different than any other city on the surface. At best, it resembled a parody. Cars from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s zipped along the multilane roads. Thousands of pedestrians roamed the sidewalks between the roads.

A hotel of concrete, ten stories high, overlooked the city's harbor and its dark waterfront. Perched atop a 10th floor balcony were Halfrida, Duchess Perpetua, Lady Ostara, Hannelore Bauer, and Francine McAdams. Cousin Ulrich stood behind the five, his back against a sliding glass screen door.

They scanned their surroundings with a pair of binoculars slung over their necks, awaiting their handpicked death squads. Everything beyond the harbor was pitch-black. The cavern ceiling lights never went far from the coastline.

"Where the hell is it?" Halfrida's fingers fumbled with the binocular's buttons and switches, searching for the night vision. The lenses inside the binoculars glowed green. "Ah, there we go."

Ulrich yawned and stretched his arms. "Can I ask you ladies something?"

"Yeah?" Francine spoke.

"Eh?" Hannelore responded.

"Was?" Ostara retorted.

Duchess Perpetua proclaimed: "Speak now, filthy wretch!"

"Just ignore her, Cousin," Halfrida said.

"I'm kind of bored right now." Ulrich leaned against the screen door. He wanted to understand what goes on inside those girls' heads. "If you had to assassinate someone–anyone–who would it be?"

A minute passed before any the girls answered.

"The Roman Emperor Diocletian," Perpetua declared. "He killed a zillion Catholics in the name of his personality cult."

"William McKinley," Francine snorted.

"Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt, and John Paul II," Ostara laughed.

Perpetua snickered. "Lord, why am I not surprised?"

"That's because you admire those men as much as your uncle!" Ostara yelled.

"Chancellor Bismarck and J. Edgar Hoover," Hannelore declared. "Bismarck, the homicidal anti-Catholic, kicked my family out of Germany for sedition! And that coward, Hoover, kicked my family out of America for sedition!"

"JFK," Halfrida said. "I've always wanted to disprove conspiracy theorists."

"Why the hell would you say that?" Ulrich blared.

"Are you as high as me, Ulrich?" Francine mused.

"Get your head out of the clouds, peasant!" Perpetua demanded.

"Everybody hated Kennedy," Halfrida explained. "Not because he was a Democrat, but because he's a wicked, horny dictator like Benito Mussolini! The White House became Playboy Mansion under the Kennedy administration!"

"*Genau*!" Ostara snapped her fingers. "Even Horst Brotzman estimated that JFK had a 25% chance of getting shot. That's how terrible he was!"

Ulrich smacked his palm against his forehead. "Good God, what is wrong with Catholic Education these days?"

"You don't understand, Cousin," Halfrida told him. "It is an historical fact that most Americans in 1960 were stupid enough to vote for a reckless, drug-abusing, warmongering, Mafia-connected, Nazi-sympathizing womanizer."

"Wait," Ulrich pondered, "Who was the Republican nominee in 1960?"

"Richard Nixon," Ostara answered.

"Oh, okay, that makes sense now." Ulrich shrugged his shoulders.

"Right," Francine agreed. "Did we forget that Kennedy had an unhealthy obsession with Fidel Castro, an obsession similar to Muammar Gaddafi's obsession with Condoleezza Rice? Did we forget that Kennedy got America involved in Vietnam before LBJ?"

Francine went on. "Did we forget that Nixon's inspiration for Watergate came from the 1960 election? Did we forget that Kennedy admired Adolf Hitler?"

Duchess Perpetua, giggling, gestured at Ostara.

Ostara nodded. "And did we even forget that one of Kennedy's mistresses included Wilhelmina Wolff, Howard Wolff's mother and a Brotzman family spy from East Germany?"

Ulrich's jaw dropped. "No way! That's got to be Fake News!"

"It's true." Ostara nodded, grinning.

"Where's your proof?" Ulrich held out his hand.

"If you got time," Ostara spoke, "Go to the White House and visit the Lincoln Room. You'll find pornographic pictures of me hanging on a wall. Behind one of them is a biometric safe, and if you could talk the current President into opening it, you'll be able to acquire the Kennedy sex tapes."

Ostara continued. "These sex tapes, which had been kept inside J. Edgar Hoover's personal safe, depicted him with Marilyn Monroe. The six of us might be able to expose them and blow that conspiracy theory wide open."

"Cool, I'll keep in touch." Ulrich shook Ostara's hand.

Halfrida screamed. "Good God, what is wrong with Catholic Education these days? My Cousin is secretly into porn!"

"What's the problem now?" Ulrich cocked his head to the side.

"Because of JFK, Horst Brotzman came close to hijacking the US government under two other right-wing presidents, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush!" She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Cousin, this is why America has been in serious trouble *before* JFK! After this 'Crossfront Coup' is over, I want you to read *The Dark Side of Camelot*!"

He tilted his head to the side. "Why do you want me to read that book?"

"To understand why we're going to meddle in the US elections next year," she explained. "America needs an ultranationalistic strongman and honest prude like Howard 'the Barbarian' Wolff to restore the Constitution! Before he becomes America's next President, we'll do another recount in Florida and then pin the blame on Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin. It's brilliant!"

"All hail the Prussian bots disguised as Russian bots!" Hannelore giggled.

In the distance, hundreds of merchant submarines blew their ballast tanks and crashed out of the water. They had sailed through a series of submerged tunnels from the deepest, darkest depths of the Pacific Ocean. Seamen climbed onto the conning towers and hoisted the flags of their nations.

One of the U-boats hoisted the flag of *Neudeutschland.* A horizontal tricolor flag of black, white, and red pierced through the darkness. This U-boat proceeded to the docks at Concord Harbor. The girls' death squads have arrived.

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At a park bench near a public fountain, not far from this morning's parade route, Marcus McAlister saw the cousins enter the park. Just like at the foreclosed mansion near Beverly Hills, he was dressed in the same clothes. Dark brown wool fatigues, a yellow beret and leather mountain boots. Marcus whistled at them, motioning them to join him at the park bench.

The cousins scurried to him.

"What took you two so long?" Marcus stood up.

"Something came up earlier," Halfrida said.

Marcus eyed both cousins. "But we can't afford to screw this up."

Ulrich whipped out his Opa's pocket watch and looked at the time. "It's only 7:30AM." He crammed it back into his other front pocket. "King Percy isn't supposed to be at the Plaza until sometime around 9:00AM."

"Still, you're both late," Marcus spoke.

"Did Chandler bring the guns I asked?" Halfrida asked.

"Wait, your boyfriend and pen-pal from Iowa is in on this?" Ulrich blurted.

"Not now, Cousin," Halfrida whispered to him.

"Yeah, Chandler made sure he didn't buy them from a gun store or a gun show back in the States," Marcus said. "Either way, Halfrida, you still owe him."

From her handbag, Halfrida pulled out thick wads of American cash. "Fifties and hundreds–used," she added. "If you survive, please give him this money."

"I keep that in mind." Marcus took the money and put it in his pockets. He gestured at a concrete footpath behind the fountain.

The footpath was a straightforward route to another park entrance. Across the street from the concrete hotel, several cars were parked on both ends of the curbside. On the left-hand side of the street was an alley that went somewhere. "Everything you know need is in a courtyard, Halfrida," Marcus said.

"Got it," she replied.

Ulrich glanced at Marcus' uniform. "What's with those clothes?"

"I stole it from a Dweller military officer," Marcus confessed. "The officer was a Colonel in the Communist Dweller People's Northwestern Union."

"Nice of you to share, Marcus." Halfrida grabbed Cousin Ulrich's hand and dragged him away from the fountain. Marcus fled the park soon after.

The alley led to a small courtyard surrounded by four large buildings. Like the ones seen from the park fountain, the windows around the courtyard were left either open or halfway open.

A matte-black four-door Volkswagen sedan was parked behind another alleyway leading to a busy city road up ahead. Several fast-moving cars sped along the road. The Brotzman cousins crossed the courtyard to reach the abandoned Volkswagen. Halfrida opened the trunk.

Cousin Ulrich whistled. "Look at what we have here." He leaned his head into the trunk.

"Give me some space," Halfrida said before joining him.

The trunk contained four large duralumin attaché cases and a three small metallic ammo boxes. The backseats of the car had been pulled down to make more room to store the cases. Inside the attaché cases were two bolt-action rifles and a pair of disassembled Thompson submachine guns.

Halfrida picked up one of the rifles, held it upright on one hand as she studied it. "This is a 6.5mm Carcano M91/38." She pulled back the bolt mechanism, opening the chamber. "It's empty." She looked down its scope. "Attachable scope is misaligned."

"Wow," Ulrich spoke, "Isn't that the same rifle Lee Harvey Oswald used to kill JFK back in 1963?"

"Yeah, this is the rifle, what the Warren Commission referred to as the 'Mannlicher–Carcano.'" Halfrida closed the bolt and placed the rifle back in its attaché case before grabbing the other bolt-action rifle.

With the other rifle in her hands, Halfrida examined it. The weapon had been sporterized as a hunting rifle with a Zielsechs 6x magnification scope. The sighting hood mounted atop the barrel at the front end of the rifle was removed, leaving the front iron sight intact.

Ulrich pointed at it. "And this is one is…what?"

"Virgil Sapienti's sniper rifle, a Mauser Model 1889, if I'm not mistaken." Halfrida looked down the scope, the barrel pointing at the tall ceiling of the cavern where Concord Harbor was located. "The scope looks like it was once Wehrmacht-issue." She pulled back the bolt. No bullets loaded. "And it's empty."

"Okay, so between the Mannlicher-Carcano and his rifle, what's the significance?" Ulrich asked.

"Conspiracy theorists over the years have claimed that Oswald or whoever had shot Kennedy with this rifle instead of an M91." Halfrida stroked her chin, holding the rifle on one hand. "Apparently, a reported 7.65 Mauser rifle is supposed to imply a possible Nazi connection to the JFK assassination."

She removed the three ammo boxes from the trunk and opened them. "Between that and Oswald having George Lincoln Rockwell in his address book, I think it's about damn time we prove them otherwise."

The first box contained stacks of smaller cardboard boxes of .45 ACP rounds for the two Thompsons. The second had a pile of pineapple hand grenades. Inside the third box were two separate sets of cartridges.

Halfrida held a set of bullets on one hand, another set on the other.

Ulrich gestured at the bullets in her hands.

"6.5mm Mannlicher–Schönauer," she said. "The other one's a '7.65mm Argentine'. In the US, Cousin, they called it '7.65mm Belgian' because this Mauser rifle was once used by the Belgian and Argentine armies."

"Huh," Ulrich voiced. "You think there might be some truth to those conspiracy theories claiming our family was behind the assassination?"

"Doubtful." She put the bullets back into the ammo boxes. She closed all the attaché cases and pulled them out of the trunk.

Ulrich picked up the ammo boxes and followed her as she walked away from the Volkswagen. The cousins approached an opened service entrance not far from the vehicle and entered a building overlooking the Plaza.

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Cross Financial Unlimited was a Swiss-German offshore shadow bank based in the United States. The company also had a special branch in the Dweller World for financial and political skullduggery. The bank stood four stories high in the middle of downtown Concord Harbor, the road next to it led straight to the Plaza.

The clock struck 9AM. Several unmarked vans pulled over the curbside in front of a bank on the other side of downtown Concord Harbor. Lady Ostara, Duchess Perpetua, Hannelore Bauer, and Francine McAdams got out of the lead van, dressed in all-black fatigues and Balaclava masks. Two platoons of death squads joined them as the girls stormed the bank.

Meanwhile, the road past the bank led to a busy intersection connected to the Plaza. From the intersection, King Percy's motorcade turned right and appeared on a road leading along a concrete concourse toward the Plaza. The chauffeur of King Percy's limousine, a matte-black 1961 Lincoln Continental four-door convertible patterned after JFK's limousine, drove slowly.

Republican presidential nominee Howard Wolff was seated in the middle seats, resting after a long joyride for gold in the American countryside. His wife, Maple, sat beside him, reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

In the backseat were King Percy and his teenage wife and cousin, November. She held two USP .45 handguns pointed against the headrest of the chauffeur. King Percy in particular had gotten bored with his life and was asking somebody–anybody–to end it for him.

Citizens screamed insults at him from the concrete sidewalks behind human barriers of stern-faced soldiers lining the concourse. Everyone pelted him with eggs, garbage, and Molotov cocktails. Not a single Molotov managed to torch the limousine.

Large projectiles were also thrown at, over, and under the vehicles in the motorcade. A piano thrown from a rooftop landed behind King Percy's limousine. The limo drove over an active Teller antitank landmine that failed to go off. Someone among the crowds tossed a hand grenade into the limousine. It too was a dud–it failed to detonate.

A teenage girl wearing a suicide vest underneath a leather overcoat and holding a detonator charged toward the middle of the street. She flashed the suicide vest and pushed the shiny red button on a detonator, shouting, "*Deus Vult* (God wills it)!" Even that bomb failed to detonate. She ran away from the street with tears in her eyes.

Flying in a fixed formation, a squadron of Communist PNU A-Wings appeared over the buildings. St. Febronia Fb-31Bs, multirole miniature planes based on the P-47 fighter, strafed the motorcade with laser beams and dropped several two-thousand pound precision-guided bombs. Their laser beams instead vaporized several people in the crowds, the bombs destroying several buildings near the concourse. And yet not a single one put a single dent, let alone a scratch, on King Percy or anyone else riding in the limousine.

A schoolbook depository full of textbooks provided a good vantage point over the entire concourse. In a large room with large labyrinthine maze of cardboard boxes, Halfrida and Cousin Ulrich had established an improvised sniper's nest. From two adjacent windows, they gawked at hundreds and hundreds of people trying in vain to assassinate King Percy.

"Gosh, look at all these people!" Ulrich said, looking out of an adjacent window through a pair of binoculars. "Are they even trying?"

Halfrida giggled. "I didn't realize that a lot of people wanted King Percy dead." She pulled back the bolt on the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle to open the chamber. "I'm starting to feel bad after talking about JFK, a right-winger no different than William McKinley or Dwight Eisenhower. And the latter, if memory serves, was almost assassinated in 1944 by Waffen-ϟϟ commandos."

"Otto Skorzeny," Ulrich blurted.

"*Ganz genau*!" She nodded.

"What made you say that?" Ulrich looked away from the window.

The rifle butt was pressed against her right thigh, the rifle barrel parallel to the ceiling. "I'm just saying: we should be glad that King Percy is allowing us to debunk all the conspiracy theories about the JFK assassination." She placed a stripper clip of five rounds above the chamber. Tilting the uppermost bullet up, Halfrida inserted the other four bullets into the chamber.

The motorcade turned left and passed by an oak tree and the schoolbook depository. Ulrich peered through the window again. He spotted Virgil Sapienti

positioned behind a wooden fence. Virgil's spotter, Marcus McAlister, stood by a nearby sidewalk with an umbrella.

"Hurry up, Cousin," Ulrich urged. "Virgil Sapienti is waiting to kill him by the grassy knoll!"

"Will you please film me?" she asked him. "This is history in the making! We're going to put an end to every JFK conspiracy theory once and for all!"

Ulrich nodded. He whipped out his smartphone and filmed her. He held up his thumb. "It's on. *Los*!"

Halfrida pushed the bolt forward, closing the chamber. She made the sign of the cross and took aim at the back of King Percy's head. "Lord, guide my bullets!" She took a deep breath.

The shakiness in her hands stopped and, her aim steadied. Time slowed down before becoming a meaningless concept altogether. Halfrida, grinning, pulled the trigger.

A loud gunshot echoed. The first shot struck the pavement behind the trunk of the car. Halfrida pulled back the bolt. The first empty shell casing landed inside the handbag slung over her shoulder instead of the floor. She closed the bolt and pulled the trigger again.

The second shot struck King Percy's back, burrowed through the right side of his spine, and exited from the front of the neck. The bullet proceeded to strike Howard Wolff, seated in front of him.

Wolff shouted in pain as the bullet hit him. "Ah, they're doing it, Maple, they're debunking it!"

"Then pray for those kids to succeed!" she yelled back.

Back in the sniper's nest, Ulrich cheered her on. "One more, keep it up!"

Halfrida pulled the bolt back again. The next shell casing made a neat landing next to her feet. She fired the next round.

The third shot bellowed. It zoomed through the right rear side of King Percy's skull and exited from the right side of the head, splattering brains and bone all over the place. The limousine sped away past a tunnel overpass.

The crowds of citizens cheered in euphoria. The Communists were coming to liberate them from the drug lord who had been governing for far too long.

Ulrich switched off his smartphone. "Perfect timing, Cousin!"

Virgil growled over the radio inside Halfrida's handbag. "Dammit, I was going to prove the grassy knoll theory, but instead you ruined it!"

A fourth gunshot followed. The bullet came from Virgil's Sapienti, his rifle being the Mauser 1889 bolt-action rifle. It shattered the window beside Halfrida's and grazed Ulrich's right shoulder before lodging itself inside one of the boxes behind him. He dropped his smartphone, stammered and dropped to his knees.

She turned to him, offering her hand. "Are you alright?"

"Ja, it's just a flesh wound from that last bullet you fired." Ulrich grabbed his smartphone and Halfrida's hand and got back up. "Did you get him?"

"Checkmate!" She winked.

Somewhere, beyond the boxes and the walls of the improvised sniper's nest, a door was kicked open. Jackboots trampled on the wooden floorboard, growing louder and louder with each passing second.

"City planning sucks around here!" a policeman shouted. "Was our King so suicidal that he decided to make his death look like the JFK assassination?"

"I know, right?" hollered another.

"Shut up!" a third screamed. "C'mon, let's bring the prize to the big winner."

The cousins grabbed their Thompsons, lying on a table between the two windows. Halfrida hung the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle over her shoulder and loaded a drum magazine into her Thompson.

Ulrich picked several extra drum magazines from the table and stuffed them into a satchel and strapped it to his back. He took a few pineapple grenades and shared them with her. "Take some, Cousin."

"*Danke*," she replied, taking two from his hands. "Follow my lead and don't die on me, Cousin."

"I'll try not to." Ulrich cocked and loaded his Thompson.

The Brotzman cousins rushed away from the sniper's nest. Gunfire and loud voices erupted in the hallway outside.

Chapter Four: Little Red Riding Hood (Renate; July 11th-14th, 2011)

"Demoralize the enemy from within by surprise, terror, sabotage, assassination. This is the war of the future."

-Hermann Rauschning, quoting Adolf Hitler

Communist PNU and Californian Empire A-Wing fighters played cat and mouse in the cavernous airspaces above Concord Harbor and neighboring Dweller cities. Tens of thousands of Communist troops and hundreds of MAFVs raced into tunnels along the PNU-CE border, intent on capturing Concord Harbor.

Air raid sirens wailed in the streets of Concord Harbor. Black smoke billowed and plumed from downtown following King Percy's assassination. Numerous bombs detonated inside several downtown buildings. Car bombs exploded in busy streets. Panicked Dweller civilians fled to the suburbs in terror. In their place were religious fanatics, Ryanite mercenaries, Underground commandos, and neo-Nazi terrorists waging a violent coup d'état against the authorities.

Fighting dragged on for the next five days. Halfrida and Ulrich sprinted past heavy combat engulfing entire city blocks. The cousins weaved between streets and alleyways to reach the designated rendezvous point. Everywhere, a constant repertoire of gunfire and explosions consumed their surroundings.

The cousins crouched behind an overturned table in the middle of a courtyard to catch their breath. "This is madness!" Ulrich cried.

"We're just getting started!" Halfrida shouted back, tossing aside an empty drum magazine from her Thompson, replacing it with another. "Are you still with me, Cousin?" She patted his shoulder.

"I'm seen combat before but not this close!" Ulrich told her.

"Then I'll take that as a 'yes.'" Halfrida exposed the upper half of her head to peak over the table. Armed CE soldiers fired at her as they charged toward her from an alley up ahead. Bullets whizzed past her.

She ducked as several more followed. "Damn, those bullets almost blew my head off!" Halfrida got up and held her Thompson from the hip, spraying bullets at approaching Californian Empire soldiers.

Cousin Ulrich joined her except his Thompson was empty. "Oh Gott, nein!" He kneeled down, set his satchel down, and swapped drum magazines.

Halfrida wasted the soldiers without him and vaulted over the table. "Let's go, Cousin!" she gestured at Ulrich.

"Natürlich," he answered, mantling the table.

The cousins jogged up to the dead soldiers in the alleyway up ahead. Halfrida kneeled in front of one of the soldiers she had just gunned down and patted her hand on the corpse. She removed a khaki-colored satchel from the body and rummaged through the contents for more .45ACP ammunition.

While Halfrida searched for ammo, a loose, bloodstained photograph flew out of the satchel. Ulrich kneeled down to pick it up. The photo depicted a Nordic-looking 'Blueblood' Dweller family, a husband and wife smiling with their newborn son. Ulrich glimpsed at the face of the body his cousin was looting and the man in the photo. "I feel sorry for him." Ulrich dropped the photo.

The alley led to a street full of ruined buildings. A six-foot tall steel-gray vehicle with treads rolled past the alleyway at high speed. "Cousin, we got another MAFV," Ulrich warned. "I couldn't tell if this one was hostile or not."

"Then help me search the other bodies for anything we could use to destroy them!" Halfrida pulled out a few full drum magazines. She reloaded her Thompson and dumped the other magazines into her own satchel. Together with Ulrich's help, she looted the other slain soldiers.

One of the soldiers' satchels contained a few antitank grenades. Small cylinder-shaped explosives painted in white with two red horizontal stripes around the top and lower portions. The mischievous grin on Halfrida's face returned after days of combat. "Nice…," she giggled. "No. 73 grenades, 'Woolworth bombs.'"

"Perfekt!" Ulrich took one of the Woolworth's from her hand. "Hang onto those, Cousin." He put it away in his satchel and stood upright. "Those might come in handy."

Motioning Ulrich to follow her, Halfrida scurried to the other end of the alley. She stopped at the left-hand corner of the alleyway and peeked around the corner. A billowing cloud of white smoke blanketed the road ahead.

"See anything?" Ulrich asked, his Thompson pointed at the courtyard, his back against hers.

Does it look like I can see anything? She peeked around the corner again.

The white smoke had dissipated into the air. Halfrida took out her binoculars and spotted what her Cousin saw in the middle of an intersection. A steel-gray St. Lawrence I/B Light MAFV proceeded toward an intersection. A Ryanite-made MAFV from the Rosy War, the chassis resembled an old German Panzer I/B from World War II.

The two-way radio in Halfrida's satchel crackled. "Action Andy to Dewy-Princess," Anthony Accardo's voice blared, "You got hostiles dead ahead!"

Drusilla's voice responded, "I see them now."

"Shoot them all down!" Anthony barked.

The twin laser machine guns on the Lawrence I/B's coaxial turret opened fire at unknown targets in the distance. From a sidewalk near its rear flank, Duchess Perpetua, Lady Ostara, Hannelore Bauer, and Francine McAdams crossed the intersection. The four girls stopped in the middle of the intersection and crouched behind the Lawrence I/B, exchanging potshots with the enemy.

So the MAFV's one of ours then. Halfrida leaned on the corner of the wall and pulled out her two-way radio. "This is Renate, can anyone hear me?" she spoke into it. "Please respond, over."

"Renate, this is 'Horseman Four,'" Duchess Perpetua greeted. "I'm reading you loud and clear. Where are you?"

"I'm in an alley, not far from your position," she replied. "His Plaid Eminence and I are coming over to your position, over and out." Halfrida put her radio away and ran out of the alley with Ulrich.

In the street past the intersection, two white Toyota Hilux pickup trucks had pulled over in the middle of a street. Two Californian Empire soldiers, leaning on the bed of the trucks, cocked and loaded M60 light machine guns and sprayed bullets all over the place like in a Rambo movie. A large platoon of supporting infantry fired their rifles as they passed by Toyotas.

Ostara, Perpetua, Hannelore, and Francine ducked under the Lawrence I/B's chassis. The Lawrence I/B absorbed the incoming bullets. Several terrified civilian Dwellers crossed the street behind it and got cut down by the enemy machine guns. Duchess Perpetua, with a field radio strapped to her back, spoke into the handset and radioed an airstrike on the two gun trucks.

Halfrida and Cousin Ulrich crawled past the slain civilians on their way to the girls. "Are they ever going to stop shooting?" Ulrich hollered.

"Don't worry," she told him, "Those machine gunners are going to overheat their barrels if they keep this up."

"Either that or those A-Wings up there will destroy them!" Ulrich pointed at a pair of PNU Fb-31Bs diving from the crowded cavern ceiling above.

The two A-Wings each released a large bomb over the enemy gun trucks before regaining altitude. The bombs detonated over the trucks, showering the whole area around them in hellfire and black smoke. Burning soldiers emerged from the flames with their clothes on fire. The Lawrence I/B put them out of their misery with a couple well-placed burst shots to the torso.

The four girls turned to the two cousins. Halfrida and Ulrich got up in a crouched posture. "Glad the two of you can make it," Lady Ostara smiled.

"We killed King Percy and robbed the Cross Financial Unlimited bank five days ago," Halfrida recalled. "What else is on the agenda besides helping the Communists capture the city?"

"Our last important target is on that plateau." Duchess Perpetua gestured at a large, bombed-out manor at the summit of a plateau. "That's King Percy's manor and the Reds want us to capture and hold it for them."

"For now," Francine said, "We need the two of you to link with the others and meet us there. Sounds fair?"

"If you say so," Halfrida retorted.

"Look on the bright side, Halfrida," Ostara reminded her. "If you and your Cousin survive this day, both of you and Harold will be racking up a lot of money once this is all over."

Or so I'm led to believe, Halfrida thought to herself.

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On the way to the plateau, Halfrida and Ulrich jogged up a long street littered with craters, vaporized piles of flesh and bone, and burnt-out MAFVs. A foul stench of rotting corpses mixed with burning diesel fuel pervaded the air.

"Can we stop, Cousin?" Ulrich grew nauseous. "I don't feel too well." He stopped by a crater and vomited. The smell was too much for him.

Halfrida returned to his side. "Are you going to be okay?"

Cousin Ulrich vomited again.

She handed him a large white clean cloth. "Even in a warzone like this, always remember to throw your trash away."

He wiped his mouth and went to an empty trash can resting next to a collapsed building, disposing of the cloth. Ulrich returned to her.

She offered him a metal canteen full of water. "Need a drink?"

"Nein," he answered. "I can keep going."

"Good to hear," she smirked, putting her water canteen away.

They continued advancing up the street. The road diverged on the T-junction. Halfrida traveled rightward, traveling around the corner of the T-junction. Moving away from the T-junction, she looked over her shoulders. Ulrich was no longer following her.

Where the hell is he this time? She sighed and leaned on an intact storefront window, spending a few seconds to catch her breath. Gunfire erupted nearby. *You better not die on me, Ulrich!* She retraced her steps and ran back to the T-junction.

Back at the T-junction, Ulrich was crouched at the street corner, scanning the left-hand road away from the junction. "I can't believe it!" he muttered.

"There you are!" Halfrida returned to him. "What are you doing?"

"Look!" Ulrich pointed his finger at something.

"What the hell?" she cried.

A black and red flying disc hovered over the center of a roundabout strewn with abandoned cars and knocked-out MAFVs. A faint blue hue was wrapped all over the circular fuselage. CE soldiers and two Toyota gun trucks were shooting at it, their bullets plinking and ricocheting off of the flying disc's plated armor.

The blue hue turned red. Something protruded out of an opening port on the front side of the levitating disc. It looked like two twin-mounted laser machine guns. The flying disc proceeded to slaughter the enemy soldiers at the roundabout. Another weapon protruded out of its fuselage. A cannon-shaped object fired two well-placed beams that disabled the Toyotas, destroying their engines.

Inhuman and flawless, the flying disc showed no mercy to the machine gunners, riddling them full of holes. The surviving soldiers retreated from the roundabout. The flying disc flew away from view.

Halfrida turned to Ulrich. "Did we just see a UFO?"

"Where have you been?" Ulrich answered. "*The Plaid Dream* isn't some run-of-the-mill science fiction novel. It's a political satire novel 'full for realities.'"

"Oh yeah," she said.

"The devil is in the details," he reminded her, "Except the devil's not ET. The devil is literally my Opa Horst, wearing a two-piece Giorgio Armani suit, a golden Rolex watch, and a Swastika armband."

Halfrida was dumbfounded. Meanwhile, a PNU A-Wing bomber plummeted out of the cavernous airspace above Concord Harbor in flames. It spiraled and

sputtered flames as it crashed into the roof of a building on her right. The flames from the crashed A-Wing spread to the upper floors and soon the rest of the building. Scared Dwellers dashed out of the front entrance with their luggage and the clothes on their backs.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Halfrida cried.

Ulrich shook his head. "You have to believe me!" The burning building exploded. Somewhere, another bomb had been planted earlier that week. Facing away from the building, he walked away from Halfrida.

She sighed and shook her head. *You're always insisting there's a time for everything, Cousin.* She ran after him.

The next few blocks were contested between the mercenaries and the security forces. Snipers picked off hapless victims, turning accessible roads into death traps. Machine gunners positioned behind windows of various buildings made kill zones out of alleyways, windows, and doorways. MAFVs and infantry combed the streets leading to an open-air marketplace, its abandoned stalls with goods for sale.

Tons of scattered pieces of paper flurried in the air like snow over a congested intersection full of derelict cars. In the middle of the intersection were Hannelore, Lance, Drusilla, Victor Gordon, and Francis Leblanc, all of them hiding behind a flipped over unmarked van. In front of the van was Drusilla's Lawrence I/B, its turret blown off.

A lone hostile MAFV rolled toward the intersection from a street full of craters and other wrecked MAFVs. It was a Longinus I/D, a Rosy War-era Catholic School Underground Light MAFV patterned after the Soviet BT-7. The big diesel engine in its rear rumbled, the coaxial turret searching for its next victim.

The Longinus I/D spotted Halfrida, Ulrich, Virgil Sapienti, Marcus McAlister, Anthony Accardo, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Eddie Mack as they appeared from a westbound leading away from a Y-junction. The group of seven waddled their way through the tiny gaps in the abandoned cars.

"Keep your heads down!" Victor shouted at Halfrida and the other six. "The gunner on that damn thing is thirsting for blood!"

The Longinus' coaxial turret roared at them. The stubby plasma cannon fired energy bolt after another in a rapid succession. The coaxial laser machine gun pelted the seven with concentrated fire.

Energized projectiles zipped past the seven in their advance toward the others positioned behind the van. Accardo, Hawthorne, and Mack entered an alleyway on the left-hand side of the street and searched for another way around. Halfrida and Ulrich dodged the Longinus' fire. Marcus and Virgil lagged behind.

Past the abandoned cars, Halfrida and her Cousin dove at the open space between the cars and the flipped over van. Lying on their bellies, they crawled toward Hannelore, Lance, Drusilla, Victor, and Francis. A hot pinkish plasma bolt flew over the cousins' heads.

The plasma bolt crashed into the corner of a building adjacent to the alleyway Accardo, Hawthorne, and Mack went. It demolished a huge portion of the building's corner, showering half of the street with fallen debris. Blinding dust

blanketed the area. Marcus ran past the cousins, keeping his head below the height of the van to avoid another barrage of laser machine gun fire.

The cousins reunited with everyone behind the van. Hannelore wrapped a clean bandage around Drusilla's head, covering a bleeding head wound. Drusilla held onto a Beretta M92F handgun with both hands.

Lance squatted beside the two girls. "Are we going to make it? I'm only thirteen and I can't afford to die!"

"Well, neither do I," Hannelore said.

"Same," Drusilla agreed.

Marcus stared at the enveloping cloud of dust behind the cousins. "Where's Virgil?" he asked Ulrich.

"No idea," Ulrich said, "Could be dead."

"I didn't see him," Halfrida added. "We should check up on him, Marcus."

"That is, until we can figure out how to get past that Longinus." Marcus turned to Hannelore, Drusilla, and Lance. "Do you guys have a smoke grenade?"

Hannelore nodded her head. From her field webbing, she placed a smoke grenade in Marcus' hand. "It's my last one," she spoke. 'Make it count!"

"Thank God." Marcus pulled the safety pin and hurled it over the van.

Red smoke concealed everyone from the Longinus' line of sight. Marcus, Lance, Hannelore, and Drusilla crossed the left side of the street and traveled into an alleyway to the marketplace.

The cousins turned to the abandoned cars behind them. While Ulrich turned away, Halfrida stared in the general direction, looking for Virgil.

The cloud had dissipated, revealing an incapacitated Virgil. His Mauser Model 1889 bolt-action sniper rifle split in half by large block of debris, the other half buried under the debris.

Another plasma bolt exploded upon impacting another building. More debris fell, crashing into one of the other cars. Halfrida's ears rang. Ulrich shook her back and forth. *I can't leave him behind*, she swore to herself.

The ringing in her eyes subsided. "Cousin," he yelled, "Cousin, we need to move or else we'll be overrun!"

"Just go without me!" she screamed. "I'll catch up with you later." She made the sign of the cross and rushed to Virgil's aid.

"Sometimes, you scare me to death with that enthusiasm of yours, Cousin," Ulrich hollered. He crossed the street as bullets flew over his head. He swerved his whole body leftward.

A platoon of enemy soldiers advanced toward him. Two squads, one traveling along the sidewalk on both sides of the street, engaged him.

Crouching next to the corner of the alleyway to the marketplace, Ulrich returned fire. He fired his Thompson in short, controlled bursts at the approaching soldiers to conserver ammunition. The satchel in on his back contained three more drum magazines, two of them almost empty.

"Cousin," Ulrich shouted at the top of his lungs, "Hurry up! I don't know how much longer I can hold them off!"

"Then go on without me," Halfrida hollered. "I'll stay with Virgil and kill these people myself."

"*Niemals*," Ulrich cried, refusing to leave her behind. "I won't let you!"

Halfrida scurried past the van, the body of Virgil over her shoulders. "Even though I'm carrying the guy who shot you in the shoulder?"

"Whatever," he said, "It doesn't matter anymore!" Ulrich threw away his Thompson and sprinted into the alleyway.

She followed in his wake. "Wait up!"

The cousins, along with the others, disappeared into a labyrinthine maze of winding paths to the marketplace. CE soldiers chased after the cousins, triggering Bouncing Betty and claymore anti-personnel mines.

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(*Three days later*)

King Percy's manor also served as the mayor's residence in the heart of the city. The building was built atop a short plateau overlooking all of Concord Harbor and surrounding areas. A stone wall surrounded the perimeter of the compound at the summit, riddled with gaping holes. The gates knocked down.

A recent skirmish happened prior to everyone's arrival. Big craters dotted the compound grounds. Dozens of dead CE soldiers lay in pools of blood. Two knocked-out MAFVs, both of them St. Lawrences, were left in flames after crashing through the gates. The manor was itself left in ruins. Windows shattered, doors knocked off their hinges.

Countless holes, both big and small, decorated the walls around the building like Swiss cheese. The holes also provided good firing positions. Someone was kind enough to set up several MG34 machine guns at a few holes facing various sides of the building, fortifying with sandbags. Another wall of sandbags blocked the twin doors at the front entrance. Behind them was a PaK38 antitank gun, its barrel pointed at the front gates.

The PaK38 caught Halfrida's eye. She paid glances at the burning MAFVs and the idle antitank gun. *Maybe that destroyed them*, she thought.

Lady Ostara, Duchess Perpetua, Francine McAdams, Drusilla Price, and Anthony Accardo emerged out of the front entrance. The girls, along with Drusilla's MAFV crewmate, had beaten the others to hill after holding back several waves of enemy troops.

They waved their hands at Halfrida and the others running alongside her. Everyone else except Ostara, Perpetua, and Halfrida ran into the building. At the steps of the entrance, Halfrida spoke to Ostara and Perpetua. "Did you find anything valuable?"

"Howard Wolff led us all up here," Ostara explained. "He claims there's a lot of old IG Farben assets inside a basement safe, valued in the billions of dollars."

"It's a big motherlode." Perpetua yawned, stretching her arms. "We're thinking about splitting the score between ourselves and the others."

"Assuming the Bolsheviks relieve us," Ostara added. "The CE Dwellers know we're here and they don't have many men left. This'll be easy."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Halfrida said. "I'm too pretty to die!"

An artillery barrage rained down on the compound. Perpetua and Ostara laughed. The girls ran inside without Halfrida.

In a hurry, Halfrida checked the number of rounds in her Thompson's drum magazine. The circular piece of metal felt light to the touch. There were five or six .45 ACP rounds left. She dumped it and the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle before pulling out her Cz75 Tactical Sports, running into the building. An artillery shell crashed into the same spot where she stood.

Running in a hallway on the third floor, Halfrida heard Ulrich's voice echoed down the hall. "Cousin," he shouted, "Where the hell are you?"

"Where are you?" she screamed over the falling artillery shells.

"I'm in an office," he responded, "Middle of the hall on your right!"

She went to the room in the center of the hall on the right-hand side. A dead maid lay in the doorway next to several empty shell casings. Halfrida trampled over the corpse on her way in.

The room was King Percy's personal study. Several bookshelves lined against the walls. Loose books and papers lay strewn on the floor. In the other side of the room, Ulrich crouched beside an MG34 mounted on a tripod behind a damaged windowsill. The windowsill overlooked the front gate.

"*Schnell*!" Ulrich yelled, gesturing her to hurry.

Halfrida tripped over an empty shell casing and fell before Ulrich's feet. She got back up as bullets whizzed past through the window. "What are you waiting for, Cousin? Load this damn thing and I'll keep them at bay!"

Ulrich pulled out a belt of Mauser 7.92mm rounds and loaded it into the MG34. Halfrida cocked the machine gun and sprayed bursts of bullets at another wave of enemy soldiers charging past the gates. A platoon of CE troops reached the front entrance and proceeded to storm the building. Gunfire broke out downstairs as more enemies entered the manor.

Bullets flew over Halfrida's head. Specks of debris from the wall above the windowsill fell on her head. She reached for her Cz75 Tactical Sports and turned her waist around. Ulrich took over the machine gun for her.

A CE soldier managed to enter the building, taking cover behind the corner of the doorway. The soldier poked his head around the corner. Halfrida fired two rounds at him, forcing him to take cover. She emptied the rest of her handgun's magazine before grabbing a pineapple grenade from Cousin's satchel.

Pulling the pin with her teeth, she chucked the grenade past the doorway. "I'm not going to die in this city, dammit!" she howled. The grenade bounced in the floor outside the room. It detonated. A dying moan was followed by the sounds of numerous gunshots from opposite ends of the hallway.

"That had to have been a whole squad of them," Lance's voice echoed across the outside hall.

"You think?" Eddie Mack's voice reverberated.

"They're retreating!" Ulrich yelled, pointing his finger at the front gate.

"And they didn't put up much of a fight either." Halfrida peered through the windowsill. "Looks like they had enough fighting!" She made the sign of the cross.

Surviving attackers ran away from the manor grounds. PNU A-Wing bombers circled around the base of the plateau, releasing their bombs at the retreating enemy. The ground shook, knocking the cousins off their feet. A bookshelf tipped over. Silence returned to Concord Harbor.

Smoke poured out of the MG34's barrel. Hundreds of empty shell casings littered the floor. Ulrich took a deep breath and exhaled. "Is it over?"

"No." Halfrida shook her head, arms crossed. "We're just getting started."

J. N. ENRIQUEZ

Chapter Five: Rehypothecation

(His Plaid Eminence; July 24th-August 31st, 2011)

"Never let an opportunity go to waste."

-Duchess Perpetua Raynerson

Las Vegas burned brighter than ever on a moonlit night, its famed casinos and hotels along the Strip. The Wolff Corporation, aside from its usual business in pharmaceuticals, also ran the Oasis Hotel Resort and Casino in the middle of the Strip. Somewhere, in a presidential suite inside the hotel building, Halfrida, Ostara, Perpetua, Hannelore, and Francine brokered arrangements to create an economic cartel known as 'Little Red Riding Hood'.

In a similar conference room, at another presidential suite several floors up, lights above an oak-furnished table flickered to life. The pair of doors to the room were closed and locked from the inside. On the table lay nine composition folders, each with a set of three maps, and opened briefcases containing stacks of US Treasury and Wolff Corporation bonds.

Ulrich sat in the center. He looked around the small room. Seated at the table were Eddie Mack, Anthony Accardo, Marcus McAlister, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Francis Leblanc, Victor Gordon, Drusilla Price, and Lance Jansen.

He addressed the others. "All of us have gathered here for a reason. We express both concern and solidarity to the 'Ryanite', the American Catholic parochial schooler. His school system continues to remain under the thumb of Underground imperialism. The House of Raynerson is on a self-centered mission to further the Catholic homeschooler."

"Amen," the others chanted, nodding their heads. Some opened their folders and skimmed through a copy of a research paper that Ulrich wrote. Others glanced at the maps of Otherworld, Dweller World, and North America.

Drusilla raised her hand. "I have a question. What caused anti-Underground sentiment among the Ryanites? Aren't Ryanites and Underground Catholics?"

"I'm glad you asked, Drusilla." He grinned. "Nobody realizes this, but the Rosy War and all of our current problems can be traced back to 1991."

"1991?" Anthony said. "What about 1997, the year the Rosy War began?"

Marcus interjected. "He's talking about how the powder keg that sparked Rosy War came into being, Anthony."

"*Ganz genau*," Ulrich concurred. "1991 was an important year. Underground had then won a war against the Dweller, both Blueblood and Mole, and began trade with the Remnants after discovering Otherworld. They also annexed the tottering 'Ryanite Prosperity Sphere.'"

"Now, that's a name I've haven't heard in over a decade," Nathaniel voiced.

"Since you're the old-timer among us, why don't you tell us?" Lance asked.

"RPS came into existence back in 1945, within the tunnels and caverns that we now call 'Wonderland,'" Nathaniel elaborated. "Fifties and sixties marked its

heyday of growth and prosperity before the seventies brought its decline. By 1991, RPS was too weak to resist annexation by Underground."

"And the Underground didn't exist until the late sixties," Victor added.

"That's right." Nathaniel nodded.

Eddie chuckled. "It all makes sense now. Ever since RPS became a footnote in history, the Ryanite struggled to regain his independence." He eyed Ulrich. "1997 was the last time an attempt for independence was made."

Ulrich snapped his fingers. "*Natürlich*," he said in an approving tone. "Emperor Bernard's predecessor, Peter II, was assassinated when his motorcade was ambushed by a Ryanite secret society, 'Plaid January.'"

"You know what that reminds me of, Ulrich?" Francis Leblanc called out. "The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and World War I."

"*Korrekt*!" Ulrich knocked his knuckles on the table. Everyone except Francis joined him.

Francis leaned back in his chair, hands resting behind the back of his head.

"And the Rosy War was fought between the Underground and the neo-Nazi era Remnants over control of Otherworld main natural resource: 'Anomalies!'" He gazed at the others. "Who controls much of the Otherworld's resources now? It's the Underground. Are we all beginning to see a connection here?"

"When you put it that way," Eddie yawned, "It sort of explains why Plaid January wanted the Ryanites to align with Neudeutschland. Even back then, they were scrambling to get their independence at any coast."

"Ah, so there's our neo-Nazi connection," Victor mused.

"I wouldn't jump to that conclusion too quickly," Marcus said. "Even though *Neudeutschland* was pro-Nazi back then, elements of its intelligence agencies weren't. It's because of these guys that Neudeutschland became a Catholic Democratic state after the Rosy War."

"Regardless," Ulrich spoke, "This may explain why Ryanite-Remnants relations continue to be solid even after that war."

"'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'" Anthony put a cigar between his lips and lit it with a match. He exhaled tobacco smoke through his nose, the others sweeping the smoke away with their hands.

"Man, this stuff is me giving a headache," Lance yawned, his stomach rumbling. "Can I go outside now and order room service? I'll pay for it."

"Be patient," Drusilla told him. "I think we're onto something."

"All we're trying to do is piece together how and why everything is the way they are," Ulrich told him. "If we can't remember what came before us, how are we supposed to solve our problems? How can we build a better future if we don't know our history?"

"That's why we're here?" Lance asked.

"That's why we're here," Ulrich answered.

Marcus straightened his seating posture. "So what does the Rosy War have to do with American Catholic Education, both parochial and homeschool? That's the $64,000 question."

Ulrich held up a clenched fist and pressed his thumb down on his index finger several times. "Without the Underground's monopoly over the Anomaly deposits in Otherworld, Catholic homeschooling would not have seen an explosion of growth since 1991. The Peace Treaty to end the Rosy War was a one-sided treaty, an excuse for the Underground to have a monopoly over the production, distribution, and sale of Anomalies."

"I was thinking the same thing, Ulrich," Nathaniel spoke. "At the rate things are going, by 2017, the number of Catholic homeschoolers is expected to reach fifteen million, the number of Ryanites at less than two million."

"That's not too far into the future," Drusilla said.

"And it's the biggest reason why the Ryanite must retake control of his demographic destiny," Ulrich stressed. "Tonight is our chance to cut the legs on that projection Nathaniel mentioned." He opened the folder under his hands and went to the last three or four pages. Until the title 'Realpolitik: Strategies and Solutions', those pages outlined his proposal.

He read aloud only the most crucial sentences. "To restore Ryanite hegemony, every effort must be concentrated toward destroying the Underground's monopoly on Anomalies. Key objectives include restoring prosperity to the Ryanite Secret School Economy (SSE), rebuilding RPS' former armed forces, and fostering allies against the House of Raynerson."

Tilting his chin up, he eyed the others. "If there is any hope in the Ryanite regaining independence, we need to pool our resources and work together." He dropped the research paper on the table. "In the coming days, I want to show you all what I can do. For now, ask yourself this: 'how can I pitch in?'"

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(*One month later*)

Horst Brotzman had a special relationship with his grandchildren and their twin cousins. It was like the Master and his three Servants from the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew. In September 2001, he funneled twenty-two billion dollars into a secret 'Economics of Violence Trust Fund' on behalf of his firstborn grandson Ulrich and all his cousins. Ulrich inherited $500,000,000 USD; Halfrida got $300,000,000 USD, and her twin brother Harold garnered $200,000,000 USD. The money would not be available to Ulrich and his cousins until August 2011.

Midnight descended on the city of Philadelphia on August 6. Dark clouds engulfed the starry skies above. A heavy downpour bombarded the city. Thunder rumbled. Twin lightning bolts flashed. Somewhere in South Philadelphia, an old payphone rang. It was mounted on a wall next to a storefront at a shopping center, the stores closed, the parking lot emptied of cars.

The shopping center was situated near a side street bordering a massive Catholic high school on the opposite side. Behind the school were the busy highway roads along I-95. At the stroke of midnight, a matte-black Lincoln Versailles, a four-door midsize luxury sedan, rolled into the parking with its

headlights switched off. The driver of the car parked at a vacant space not far from the payphone.

The front passenger door opened. Ulrich stepped out, clad in a black leather overcoat, matching aviator sunglasses and a wide-brimmed fedora hat. Looking over his shoulders, he dashed toward the payphone and picked up the receiver. "Ja?" he spoke into the receiver.

The voice of Opa Horst greeted him on the other end. "Lady Ostara–Downtown Philadelphia." Horst hung up.

Ulrich followed suit. *'Lady Ostara–Downtown Philadelphia...was ist das, Opa?* Vague and cryptic, the logic behind his Opa's message was unknown to him. A satphone, nested in the pockets of his black dress pants, vibrated.

He picked it up. "Hallo?"

"Cousin, it's me," announced the voice of Halfrida. "Did you or Harold receive your share of the Trust Fund yet?"

"Nein," Ulrich answered, his back facing against the payphone. "And you do realize that I have not the slightest idea what Harold's doing, ja?"

"Well, I'm just saying if you knew anything," she added.

"Except I don't know," he told her. "All I got was a strange message from my Opa. 'Lady Ostara – Downtown Philadelphia.'" He yawned.

"As for me, I got my money from your Opa," she said.

"Okay, then have you heard anything from Harold?"

"He's been rambling over and over that his money was somehow 'misplaced' in all sorts of places." Halfrida let out a nervous chuckle.

"It's unusual of you to be chuckling like that, Cousin."

"I've got my reasons." She sighed. "Listen, this Trust Fund has nineteen billion dollars that don't have your name, mine, Harold, or our other cousins names. Guess where the rest of the money was being kept?"

Do I even want to know? Ulrich shook his head.

"The Cross Financial Unlimited bank in Concord Harbor," she said. "Ostara, Perpetua, Hannelore and Francine simply took the money and dumped them at another Cross Financial branch in downtown Philadelphia."

That can't be a mere coincidence. His nose crinkled. *If that's the case, then meeting Ostara after midnight can't be a coincidence.* "Cousin, do you happen to know Lady Ostara's number by any chance?"

"I do, but aren't you doing to meet her later tonight?"

"*Natürlich*," he spoke, "But it would be convenient to backchannel with someone as untrustworthy as her."

"Okay, I'll text her number to your smartphone."

"Danke. I'll call you again after I'm done with classes later today." Ulrich hung up. His smartphone vibrated. He had received a text message with Lady Ostara's satphone number. Ulrich dialed her number on his satphone.

Lady Ostara's voice greeted him on the other end. "I've been expecting you. Right now, you may be wondering where your money is and perhaps whether you can inherit the rest of the trust fund under your name."

"This isn't funny, Matilde," he growled. "That money–all 19.5 billion–belongs to me and my three like-minded cousins."

"You are right about the five hundred million, but not the nineteen billion," she agreed. "But if you decide to spend that money, I'd be careful if I were you."

"What's going to happen?" Ulrich placed the satphone next to his other ear.

"By choosing to spend that nineteen billion, you are hypothecating that money with you-know-who," Ostara warned. "You-know-who is going to 'rehypothecate' that money, so you, Halfrida, Harold, and Heinricka better pay up on your debts or else…"

"Or else what," he pondered, "What happens if we don't pay up?"

"You all will find out soon enough," she warned. "So, what's your plan?"

Ulrich paused for a few minutes. What could do wrong? He resumed the conversation. "Okay, Matilde, do you know where the 'Milchpalast' is?"

"Jawohl," she answered.

"Meet me there at 9AM sharp," he replied. "Give me everything I need to acquire the money."

Ostara cackled like a deranged, genocidal lunatic as she hung up.

He walked away from the payphone, stepped onto the asphalt, and walked back to the Lincoln. Ulrich opened the front passenger door and sat in the seat, closing the door. He turned to the driver, Anthony Accardo. "Take me to Downtown Philly tomorrow morning."

Anthony nodded. "You're the boss." He steered the car out of the parking lot and drove off.

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Cross Financial Unlimited also had a branch in downtown Philadelphia. Ulrich and Anthony stood by the curbside on the opposite side of the street from where the building stood. A few cars drove past them on the road. The boys, looking both ways, crossed the street at a brisk pace. Stepping onto the sidewalk in front of the entrance, they entered the building.

Downstairs, in the bank's basement, Ulrich and Anthony strolled up to the bank vault. The owner of the bank remote-opened the vault door from his executive office two floors up. Surveillance cameras mounted on the corners of the room outside the vault zoomed in on the boys. They watched the two enter the vault, arms and hands kept close to their bodies.

In the vault, the boys approached and inspected each of the deposit boxes mounted on the walls. After brief talks with the owner, they knew where to look: 'Safety Deposit Box No. 0412'.

Ulrich turned to Anthony. "You still have the key from Lady Ostara?"

"Yeah, I still have it." Anthony dug into his pocket and showed it to Ulrich.

"What are we waiting for?" Ulrich gestured at the deposit box. "Open it."

Anthony unlocked the deposit box and opened it. He whistled at the vast wealth stored inside. "This is it, Ulrich." He tilted his head toward him, his hand gesturing him to take a closer look.

"This is the 'motherlode' Duchess Perpetua was so fond of saying last month?" he wondered.

"You bet it is." Anthony nodded.

The deposit box contained stacks upon stacks of corporate securities dating back to 1933. Some of them were US Treasury-backed bonds, while others were corporation bonds issued by Bauer Industries and the Wolff Corporation.

Grabbing a small stack out of the deposit box, Ulrich sifted through them. Each one was valued at an obscene total of one billion US dollars. A few words misspelled. Modern anti-counterfeiting security threads and watermarks embedded on the paper. "There's something odd about these instruments," he spoke.

"Just a simple anti-counterfeiting security precaution," Anthony said. "Some people like to add in typos to dupe potential counterfeiters."

"Whose idea was this?" he pondered.

Anthony glanced at the instruments. "That would be your Opa." He snagged one of the bonds from the stacks inside the deposit box. "These are all bearer bonds–they're meant to substitute cash in large-scale transactions. Unlike other securities, whoever holds the bearer bonds is considered the owner."

"Oh, I get it now." Ulrich snapped his fingers. He gazed at the financial instruments in his hands again. "So the misspelt words, security threads, and watermarks were there for a reason."

"Uh-huh." Anthony nodded. "But you're also forgetting one thing."

"And what's that?" he muttered.

"Bauer Industries, nowadays, is a *Canadian* corporate conglomerate," Anthony reminded him. "Yes, it was an American corporation before World War II, but the Bauer family relocated it to Canada before that War ended."

Anthony pointed at the Wolff Corporation's name printed on one of the bonds. "And the Wolff Corporation didn't exist until 1952." He pulled out the peculiar bearer bond away from the deposit box. "Take a look."

Ulrich's jaw dropped. "IG Farben…," he murmured. "What's it doing here?"

"The Wolff Corporation was originally a subsidiary of one of the companies that formed IG Farben." Anthony pointed his finger at Ulrich's chest. "The Wolffs, in a nutshell, represented your family's financial investments in that cartel. The Wolff Corporation was formed as an American corporation in 1952, the same year IG Farben began its decades-long liquidation."

A wide grin spread across Anthony's face. "Except that's not the craziest part, Ulrich." He set the two securities aside on the glass table. "IG Farben is not expected to complete its liquidation process until October 31, 2012."

"*Oh Mein Gott*…" Ulrich shook his head.

"Turns out, the company had so many different patents and agreements with various countries that it took governments decades to liquidate every single asset." Anthony chuckled. "It's madness, I tell you."

"Ja, ja." He nodded. "But if whatever you're saying this is true, Anthony, then an unscrupulous person will find these perfect for blackmailing." Ulrich put the

stack down on the table. "In our case, however, these are *legitimate* corporate securities that just happened to look half-counterfeit."

"So you do understand the gist of my point." Anthony gave Ulrich a high-five. He pulled out a magnifying glass and his smartphone from his pockets and gave it to him.

Ulrich glimpsed at the counterfeit bonds. Swiping his finger along to the side, he browsed the photos of legitimate bonds stored on Anthony's phone. He used the magnifying glass to compare the legitimate ones against the counterfeits. "Ei, I see, I see…" The counterfeit bonds, compared to the real ones, were properly spelt and perfected to the smallest detail.

"That's counterintuitive ingenuity," Ulrich voiced.

"It is, isn't it?" Anthony said. "If you need to secure the loyalty of somebody that you know is a little dubious and questionable, these bonds are our best shot."

"And we know the right person in need of this funny money."

In unison, the boys blurted: "Cardinal Wolk."

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(*One week later*)

In a multistory building, somewhere in Downtown Philadelphia, Johannes Cardinal Wolk sat at an oak-furnished desk inside his spacious office. His Eminence donned a pair of silver spectacles and studied a financial report compiled by accountants in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Paragraphs of pages, rife with charts and numbers with large zeroes, warned of a massive deficit in the Archdiocese's coffers. *After last year's sex abuse scandals and other incidents, the Archdiocese is facing bankruptcy*, one of the pages read.

The curtains behind His Eminence had been pulled back, revealing a large window with a panoramic view of the city skyline and the Delaware River. A flying disc silently levitated outside the window. A camera retracted outward from the bottom of its round fuselage and snapped photographs of Cardinal Wolk. The flying disk ascended into the skies at an incredible speed, disappearing in the clouds above.

The desk phone rang. His Eminence set the documents down on the desk and picked up the handset. "Hello?"

His Eminence's secretary spoke on the other end. The voice belonged to a forty-something year old Catholic priest. "Your Eminence, you have a guest on line three."

"Is it another investigative reporter, Father McPherson? I thought we succeeded in resolving that 'issue' already."

"No. It's that *family*." Father McPherson was referring to the Brotzmans.

"Ah, I see. Keep them on the line."

"As you wish." Father McPherson hung up.

Cardinal Wolk pushed the button for line three and held the desk phone close to his right ear. Having assumed that ϟϟ Colonel Horst Brotzman was contacting him, His Eminence spoke into the handset in his native tongue. "*Guten Morgen, Herr Obersturmbannführer. Wie gehts es dir*?"

Instead, it was Halfrida Brotzman. "Your Eminence," she greeted. "It is an honor to be speaking with you this morning. I had spent months waiting to have an audience with you over the phone."

"Agreed." Cardinal Wolk took off his spectacles and placed them atop the stack of financial documents. "You and your twin brother have come at an inconvenient time. The Catholic educators–the teachers, if you will–are on strike."

"Why are they on strike?" Halfrida pondered.

"The teachers in the Catholic schools are not as well-paid as their public school counterparts," His Eminence explained. "I sincerely pray that your *Onkel* (Uncle), made the right decision to vouch on you and your brother's behalf."

"Father Leonard has been an Augustinian priest since the waning days of Vatican II," she said. "I assure you, Your Eminence, he has made a wise choice."

"But this modest proposal your brother promotes is unfeasible."

"Nothing is impossible with God."

"That is true, but only if there is will and a way."

"As a former family associate, you would know that we Brotzmans have unrivaled power that can be of benefit to the Catholic Church. The big question is whether you and the other American Catholic bishops will convene this matter at a certain 'Fourth Plenary Council of Baltimore.'"

"Jawohl, as long as you and Harold are able to resolve the ongoing teacher's strike," His Eminence said.

"Have no fear," Halfrida told His Eminence. "I sent a trusted family member to your office this morning. Treat him well, okay?"

Someone knocked on the door to the office. Cardinal Wolk eyed the door. "Who is it?" His Eminence called out.

"Your Eminence, you have another guest," Father McPherson hollered from the other side. "A young boy named 'Ulrich Brotzman.'"

"Be right there!" His Eminence responded, before returning to Halfrida. "Did you send one of your cousins to my office?"

"I did," Halfrida confessed. "Just remember our deal from last month. Accept our money and my family will break the strike. I will speak to you again later." She hung up.

The door opened. Father McPherson leaned his body against the door, his hand wrapped around the doorknob. Ulrich strolled into the room with a black leather briefcase, a pair of handcuffs bounding his wrist to the handle.

"Thank you, Father." Cardinal Wolk smiled, nodding his head from here. "I will take of the boy from here."

"Very well." Father McPherson walked away from the doorway.

Cardinal Wolk pointed at the door. "Close the door."

"*Natürlich*." Ulrich closed the door behind him.

"I find it bizarre for Horst Brotzman to name his firstborn grandson after a harsh critic of the Church," His Eminence voiced.

Ulrich snickered at the Cardinal's remark. "Ja, ja, 'Ulrich von Hutten.'" He laughed. "It's all the more reason why I am here with you this morning."

The Cardinal gestured at the chairs in front of the desk. "Have a seat then." His Eminence folded his hands beside the spectacles. "We have much to discuss."

Once seated, Ulrich settled the briefcase over his lap.

"What if I told you that reality is not what you've been taught as a child?" His Eminence spoke in a nonchalant tone.

He nodded. "Then I wouldn't be surprised at the truth, Your Eminence. It turns out that there are two worlds: this 'Real World' and that world of Dwellers, Anomalies, Jackbooters, and Remnants. I am not surprised at all that my family is responsible for discovering this alternate realm and the factions that govern it. For me and my twin cousins, we believe using this alternate realm could make Catholic Education great again."

"Ever wondered if your family had also cemented a certain legacy that began before the Second World War and thereafter?"

Ulrich pondered over the question, burrowing deeper into his skull to unravel the mystery. His spine chilled at the slightest thought of the answer. "Wait, are you saying the Third Reich survived?" he blurted.

Closing his eyes, Cardinal Wolk nodded. "There is every indication that it did, and the Remnants were just half of the story. Your family had plans to continue the War against the United States and the rest of the Real World. That War, I fear, may have morphed into this so-called 'Global War on Terror.'"

His Eminence glared at him with a stern face.

"I understand the risks, Your Eminence," he said. "Whether Cousins Harold, Halfrida or Heinricka acknowledge them is another matter. Always remember, the Gates of Hell will never prevail against the Church."

"Then why bring yourselves and the rest of the Church involved in that alternate realm?" His Eminence told him. "What motivates you in particular?"

"As Catholics, my cousins and I assert that the Church should have a larger influence in that realm," he explained. "We are called to serve the New Evangelization there. Thanks to the Underground–and the Rosy War, we now have a foothold, but my cousins and I think we can do better." Ulrich pointed at the briefcase on his lap. "And that is the reason why I am here this morning."

"What is inside the briefcase?" Cardinal Wolk asked.

"Nineteen billion dollars." Ulrich opened the case, showing the Cardinal the neat stacks of corporate securities. "I assume this should be more than enough to cover the Archdiocese's deficits and maybe give these teachers a raise for once?"

"Jawohl." His Eminence reached for the spectacles and put them back on. "Ah, so the Lord did get you and your cousins involved as part of an elaborate gift." Cardinal Wolk made the sign of the cross.

"And He has, as long as you are on me and my cousins' side," Ulrich said.

Cardinal Wolk picked up the handset from the desk phone. "May I speak with your cousins alone?"

"No need." Ulrich held up his hand. "As with Howard Wolff, my cousins and I still trust you, Your Eminence."

Chapter Six: The KBM Putsch
(Ryanite Chorus; January 29th-February 28th, 2012)

"Damn, it really was Lady Ostara. I should blame all of my life's problems on those two."
-Fake News

Newsreels were selected by Cousin Ulrich and the Brotzman twins as their medium of choice to flaunt everyone else's recent blunders. Color and high-definition included. Each newsreel began with a stylized white dove, its wings spread wide and an olive branch between its beaks. Prussian military music played in the background as the title, '*Peace Through Strength!*' appeared over the dove in German-looking Gothic typography.

A girl named 'Fake News' was hired as a narrator. She spoke in an obnoxious Californian Valley Girl accent. "From across our nation and around the world, bringing the latest news to you!" After the intro, the standard black and white slide bore the words 'Militarized Gun Control?' in German gothic blackletter.

Archive footage from the Rosy War played onscreen as Fake News narrated over violent, gruesome scenes taken during the conflict. "In war, gun control never works. Under the terms dictated by the Peace Treaty, we're not supposed to have Weapons of Mass Destruction! Like, can't you believe that?"

"Consider this, like, chart for once!" A biased, dubious chart appeared. It showed the number of military grade hardware that the Ryanites were allowed to possess. A bar ascended, a silhouette of a German coal scuttle helmet materializing inside the bar. "Our army cannot have more than 100,000 people!"

Several more bars appeared, only to descend back down into nothingness. "And we're not even supposed to have MAFVs, a navy, an air force, railway superguns, killer robots, automated turrets, space-based kinetic railgun platforms, and other genocidal sci-fi weaponry too horrendous to use! Not fair!"

"Anyhow, troops of the newly formed 'RGA' (*Ryanischen für eine Großkatholische Ausbildung*; 'Ryanites for a Greater Catholic Education') train at undisclosed Remnants military bases in Otherworld," she spoke over scenes of Ryanite platoons traversing through an obstacle course. Soldiers climbed over tall wooden barriers and crawled under long stretches of barbed wire as fast as they could. They tip-toed along one of three slender ledges over a pit filled with water.

The footage later cut to clips of RGA soldiers practicing small arms training at a firing range. Another clip showed pairs of them practicing hand-to-hand combat, their bayonets fixed to the barrels of their rifles. One of the pairs showed a soldier almost stabbing the lower jaw of his mock opponent. The tip of his bayonet came within a few inches from his carotid artery. A few more inches and the flow of blood to that soldier's brain would have been severed.

"Stay awake, kids," Fake News declared. "I wouldn't sleep if I were you!"

The next slide read: *Tearing up the Peace Treaty*. It was accompanied by sound effects of people clapping and cheering. "The gears inside Duchess Perpetua's brain were kicked into overdrive," Fake News narrated over a scene depicting an

annoyed Perpetua reading a storybook to a bunch of young kindergarteners. "'Which one of these girls screwed me last month over Ryanite rearmament?'"

A scene showed Halfrida and Harold crossdressing as twin sisters in matching Bavarian dirndl dresses, yodeling somewhere in the Andes. "'Was it those crossdressing twins?'"

"'Those neo-Nazis I bought anthrax and sarin nerve gas from?" Another scene featured Lady Ostara standing alongside a row of stern-faced Nordic girls raising their right arms at Nuremberg-style rally. Columns of men carrying red-hot torches and Nazi flags and marching in a Swastika formation were also shown.

"'That junkie and her crazy family of radical Christian Fundamentalists?'" A scene featured Francine McAdams seated at a wooden table inside a concrete conference room, snorting a line of cocaine through a rolled-up $100 dollar bill.

"'The Canadian child celebrity everyone in Hollywood loves to hate?'" A scene pulled from a Hollywood film showed Hannelore as the lead actress. A boy around her age held her in his arms, speaking to him in her final moments of life.

Fake News continued her narration over a scene of Harold and Halfrida, still dressed in Bavarian dirndls, flirting with a drunken teenage boy during Oktoberfest. "'Damn, it really was Lady Ostara. I should blame all of my life's problems on those two.'"

***

(*Four weeks earlier*)

Kaiser Barbarossa Mall (KBM) was a massive Pennsylvanian shopping mall nested between Harrisburg and the neighboring town of Hershey. The complex consisted of two three-story buildings, dubbed West and East KBM, connected by a sub-level passageway lined with retail stores. Three checkpoints inside and below the passageway were designated 'Alpha', 'Bravo', and 'Charlie'.

After its closure on January 5, 1997, Ryanites began squatting within its walls. KBM's new owners converted the small, standalone stores into shops run by merchants known as 'Jackbooters', constructing spacious, luxurious shacks inside the larger anchor stores.

The deed to one of KBM's shacks fell into Cousin Ulrich's hands after the Crossfront Coup. Situated in Plaid January, a 'neighborhood' built into an old big box store, the shack was a nice, well-to-do home constructed out of plywood and corrugated sheet metal.

Ceiling lights glowed in a short corridor inside his shack as he stepped out of his bedroom, closing the door behind him. Past the water closet, the kitchen appeared on his left, the living room on his right. Yawning and stretching his arms, Ulrich went into the kitchen. In the kitchen, a long table was lined against the wall next to a refrigerator and stove. An assortment of weapons and ammunition were laid out on the breakfast table.

Three blonde girls were seated in the chairs around the table. 'Halfrida' was seated next to the refrigerator, his hair dyed blonde. He had his eyes glued to *Ryanite Weekly Review*, Wonderland's daily newspaper. Beside him sat another Halfrida, her hair also dyed blonde.

The third girl, a porcelain, platinum blonde and dark blue-eyed girl wearing glasses with circular lenses, sat on the other side of the table. She nibbled on a buttered piece of toast, chewing it in her mouth over and over again.

Ulrich's eyes narrowed at the two Halfrida lookalikes. *Wait a minute, which one is the real Halfrida again?* He crept towards her and paid several glimpses of two girls from head to toe.

'Halfrida' lowered his newspaper and tilted his head, smiling. "Hey Ulrich."

"Harold?" Ulrich's eyebrows rose. "I didn't expect to be seeing you here!"

"The same goes for you, Cousin!" Harold kissed Ulrich. An imprint of his luscious red lips was stamped on Ulrich's face. "I didn't think you'd be in America, terrorizing Americans with your presence."

Ja, das ist Cousin Harold, Ulrich thought. "Whatever happens to you, Harold, don't tell anyone in the family that I'm here. You got that?"

Harold nodded. "Your secret is safe." He grabbed his napkin from the table and wiped the lipstick from Ulrich's face. "You won't be mentioned anywhere in *Fame and Hono*r." He cracked another smile.

Praise be to God. Ulrich wrapped his arms around Harold before turning to the real Halfrida. The girl on the other side of the table was an unfamiliar face. "So, Halfrida, who's this beautiful girl?"

"Is he undressing me with those eyes?" Margaret whispered to Halfrida.

Halfrida shook her head. "Why would he do that?" she whispered into her ear. Gesturing both hands at Margaret, Halfrida eyed Cousin Ulrich. "Cousin, I want to introduce you to Margaret Diana Richardson. She and Harold met each other back in Chapter One of *Fame and Honor*."

Margaret's eyes darted across the room. Biting her lips, she stuttered. "I-it-it's nice…to meet you…?" She leaned against the table, holding out her hand over the table. "Please don't kill me…"

Is she shy around new people? Ulrich scratched his head. He gawked at the weapons laid on the table. *Or is it because of something else?* "Are you shy because of Harold crossdressing?"

"I sort of saw it coming," Margaret giggled in an obnoxious manner.

What the hell is up with that giggling? Ulrich covered his ears.

Harold tapped on Ulrich's shoulder. "Cousin, my twin sister…," Harold bit his tongue and paused for a few seconds. "Well, she's running 'errands' for somebody in the Otherworld." He paused for a few seconds. "No idea what you and her are up to, but whatever it is, Margaret and I have been asked to help out."

"How'd you three get inside my house?" Ulrich voiced.

"We took a Teleportation Transponder I stole from an Underground military barracks in Other-Boston, the homeschoolers' capital." Halfrida pointed her thumb at an idle Teleportation Transponder laid on the floorboards of the living room. "You can thank me for that later."

Ulrich shivered. "But damn, I can't believe Harold is still crossdressing as you, Halfrida." He sat in a fourth seat, nested beside Harold and Halfrida's, at the table. "It's almost scary how Harold looks identical to his twin sister."

"Yeah, it's like *Boys from Brazil*!" Harold laughed.

"Except there's also inspiration from a Japanese Manga, *Maria Ho*l…"

"Life imitates art sometimes!" Harold interjected.

Ulrich made the sign of the cross and mumbled to himself. "Our Lady of Oliver North, please pray for my crazy cousins. One of these days, they're both going to get themselves and myself killed…amen."

"Seriously…" Harold crossed his arms. "This damn place reminds me of East and West Berlin during the Cold War! Wouldn't you agree, Cousin?"

"Because in the old days," Halfrida told her, "KBM was once the commercial heart of the Ryanite Prosperity Sphere. Jackbooters from the all the Earth once visited its backrooms to haggle and barter over goods not sold to the public."

"Was that why people decided to start squatting here after the closure?" Margaret mused.

"Uh-huh." Halfrida She picked up her Cz75 Tactical Sports from the table and inserted a loaded magazine into the weapon. She pulled the slide back, revealing a bullet inside the chamber. She set the gun down.

"By the way, Halfrida, why are you three here?" Ulrich asked.

"Let's just say, I'm running two errands, one for my brother, the other for Ostara," Halfrida whispered into his ear. She grabbed her handgun and dumped it in her handbag, resting on her lap.

"Care to elaborate?" Ulrich stroked his chin.

"Not sure if you were paying attention, but the Ryanites of Philadelphia are protesting the closures of some forty Catholic schools and five Catholic high schools." Halfrida's devious grin widened. "I'm here to kick things into high gear, you know, give Catholic America reasons to support our cause."

Gunfire and explosions engulfed the shopping mall. Halfrida smiled. "For the KBM Putsch has already begun!" she screamed.

***

Revolutionary fervor swept across KBM towards the end of January. Ryanite guerrillas from Wonderland flocked to the enclosed corridors of East KBM and its subterranean complex in droves. Together with local Ryanites, they took up arms in the corridors of East KBM and declared an insurrection against the Underground occupation forces.

The smell of cordite loomed in the air inside the mall. Gunfire bounced on the walls, the walls themselves reinforced with Anomaly-based materials to prevent the gunfire from escaping the building.

At the entranceway to Plaid January Residential, Halfrida stepped onto the scene, took a door breath and exhaled. "Keep moving, everyone!" she screamed, tightening her grip around the Winchester pump-action shotgun in her hands.

Harold joined Halfrida at her side with Drusilla and Lance in tow.

"Where the hell's Margaret?" Halfrida told her brother.

"She was following the rest of us just a second or two ago." Harold turned around called out to Margaret. "Are you still there? We can't leave you behind!"

Voices echoed from inside. From the top of her lungs, Margaret screamed: "Get the hell off of me, you pervert!" Sounds of a struggle ensued for less than a minute. Muffled gunshots fired from a Soviet Makarov handgun enveloped the former big box store. The shots were followed by the dying moans of a man.

Emerging the shadows was a panicked Margaret, scurrying toward the others. Her clothes were stained in drops of scarlet. Nobody had any idea whether the blood belonged to her or someone else. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," she wailed. "I-I-I can't believe…I k-killed someone!" Margaret broke down in tears and dropped her knees, sobbing. "No, God, please God, no! What the hell have I done?"

"Pull yourself together…!" Harold kneeled beside Margaret, shaking her by the shoulders. "Nothing will happen to you if stay with us!"

Halfrida sighed. *Who the hell would want to rape someone as defenseless as this girl?*

"What's the plan, Halfrida?" Lance asked her, yawning.

Halfrida pointed at the imposing security gates at the western end of East KBM. The walkways on all three floors eventually converged in front of the security gates. "See those chain link fences, sandbags, and riot police? That's Checkpoint Charlie. The guerrillas are planning to stage a breakthrough to get past it. After that, they'll be heading past the central corridor, and then Checkpoint Bravo outside West KBM."

"So our goal right now is to secure this place?" Lance added.

"Right," she answered.

"We'll do what we can." Drusilla nodded her head. She decocked her Beretta M92F handgun and held onto the grip with both hands. "Let's roll, Lance!"

"Give me a second." Lance ejected an empty magazine from his Walther P38 handgun and inserted a fresh one.

"Done?" Drusilla blurted.

"Yeah, come on!" Lance hurried away from the group.

Drusilla ran after him. "Wait up!"

"What about us?" Harold asked.

"I need you two to help the others defend East KBM against everyone–Underground, State Police, UN Peacekeepers, you name it." Halfrida held the Winchester aloft on her right arm and gestured at the stores all around them. "If any of the storeowners need any extra hands, you help them out."

"But what about Margaret?" Harold wrapped her arms around her. "She isn't trained for combat like you and me."

"That's my point," she barked. "Whatever you do, don't die on me!" She turned to Margaret. "Same goes for you!"

"Okay, okay!" Margaret wiped the tears from her eyes.

Harold picked up Margaret and whisked her away to Constanzo's, a tavern across from Plaid January. At Constanzo's, Anthony Accardo pummeled through the glass doors, lugging around a wooden carton of Molotov cocktails. Sixteen year old Vincenzo Constanzo, the tavern's owner, held the door for Harold and Margaret, swapping the opened sign on the other door with the closed sign.

Accardo settled the wooden crate outside the storefront, waving his arm at Halfrida. "Grab a Molotov!" he shouted at her. "Show those homeschoolers what you're made of!" He took one and joined several Ryanites in their charge toward the gates of Checkpoint Charlie.

She smirked. *Thanks for the Molotovs, Anthony*. Halfrida ran up to the crate, grabbed a few bottles and stuffed them inside her satchel. She advanced down a hallway between Constanzo's and Plaid January to an elevator lobby on the left-hand corner. Unlike the others, she had her own plans: help a guerrilla contingent seize Checkpoint Alpha and then blow up a bridge between Wonderland and the Dweller World.

Pushing the elevator button on a wall panel, she made the sign of the cross as she waited for the elevator doors to open. She straightened her necktie and tugged her bottle blonde tresses. Time slowed down to a meaningless concept. The door opened, revealing three armed Underground soldiers with SKS rifles. "Drop your weapon!" they hollered at her in low pitched voices.

Halfrida leaped to the left side of the elevator doors, firing the Winchester at the soldiers in midair. Dozens of small pellets tore through one of the soldiers' military fatigues, rupturing vital organs. Bullets flew past Halfrida within inches from her head and shoulders. Pumping the forend backward sent an empty twelve gauge shell flying out of the chamber. She landed on her back, legs spread wide.

The two soldiers rushed out of the elevator, eager to catch a convenient glimpse of her black silk panties and garter belt. "Nice," one of them called out.

"Do you talk to your mother with that mouth?" Halfrida screamed, sending buckshot into their bodies. The soldiers, blood pouring out of their torsos, staggered and fell. Halfrida got back on her feet and fired a few more shells at both of them. "That's what you get for looking up my skirt!"

Smoke emanated out of her Winchester. Halfrida loaded several twelve gauge rounds and pulled the forend back, loading the next shell into the chamber. *Gosh, this morning is just getting started and there are perverts roaming around!* She walked up to the elevator and squeezed through the elevator doors as they were closing.

***

Beyond the tunnels to Checkpoint Alpha and bunkers nested in the walls between it was West-Emory Bridge. A multilane steel bridge built inside a big limestone cavern across from the lower floors of KBM. A chasm at the bottom of the cavern carried a torrent of rushing water siphoned away from a canal to the Delaware River.

The guerrillas assaulted the wooden palisades, guard towers and guard houses along the eastern side of the bridge. They overwhelmed the Underground military police with sheer numbers, forcing the survivors to retreat to the other side of the cavern. With the eastern portion secured, the guerrillas positioned themselves behind the wooden structures, sandbag walls, and parked vehicles.

"Renate, we're now in position," Nathaniel informed her over the radio. "What's your current position?"

Halfrida, riding the ThyssenKrupp elevator down to KBM's lower levels, picked up her radio. "Repeat that again, NH."

"I say again," he spoke, "What is your current position?"

"On my way to the lower levels," she answered.

"Be careful navigating those halls," Francis chimed. "We encountered a couple active enemy MAFVs in there."

"Yeah, and we lost a couple guys thanks to them," Marcus added.

"Don't worry about me." Halfrida rested the Winchester against her shoulder, the handset held against her left ear. "I'll be fine on my own."

"God bless you!" the boys called out.

She put the handset away in her satchel. The ThyssenKrupp elevator came to a halt. *Well, time to get back to kicking some more homeschooler ass!* She giggled as elevator doors opened, pumping back the shotgun as she stepped out.

The elevator lobby was a mess. Fluorescent lights blown out, others dangling from the ceiling, shooting sparks. Dead Underground military police and Ryanite guerrillas lay alongside weapons, shell casings, and pools of blood, loose papers strewn on the ground. Holes of varying circumferences riddled the walls.

Somewhere, in the hallways leading away from the elevator lobby, gasoline engine noises reverberated on the walls. The smell of premium grade gasoline flowed through the gaping holes. Steel treads slapping against ceramic tiles. A patrolling enemy MAFV had detected another Ryanite to kill.

Halfrida made the sign of the cross. *Let God be the final judge.* She smirked and trekked toward a pair of closed doors past an overturned help desk, the dead secretary still in her chair. With enough force, she kicked the doors open.

Out in a hallway, an Underground MAFV pulled over in front of the doorway, its rear facing Halfrida. A Louis I/C, a Ryanite pre-Rosy War MAFV modelled after the ČKD Panzer 38(t). Armor plating riveted to its sleek dark-green chassis, the coaxial turret swaying left and right along a narrow arc.

God was on her side as always. *These guys don't know what they're doing!* Halfrida pulled out a Molotov cocktail and set the oily rag on fire. "The Brotzman family sends you its kindest regards!" The Louis I/C, its onboard electronics detecting Halfrida's voice, turned around. In a split second, she chucked the Molotov at its rear engine. She rolled away from the doorway. The Molotov broke on top of the rear engine hood.

Gasoline fuel and flames seeped into the engine, disabling the Louis I/C as its panicked crew disconnected their central nervous systems from it. Onboard emergency fire sprinklers doused the flames with water, but the damage had been done. Black smoke billowed out of the engine, fuel leaking into the rest of the chassis. Halfrida rushed past the Louis I/C seconds before it exploded.

Upon evading several halls full of patrolling Louis I/Cs, Halfrida squatted in front of a steel door. The doorknob was jammed into place. Blocks of C4 plastic explosive charges had been taped to the door, the C4 rigged to blow on a timer. Someone, like Chandler for instance, left the explosives there for her.

She cackled. *I always knew I could count on you, Chandler!* Halfrida set the time and ran away from the doorway. The C4 blew off the door hinges and sent the door flying over a balcony, its handrails reinforced with sheets of corrugated steel and sandbags.

"Look out!" Francis' voice echoed from the cavern.

"Nathaniel, get away, get away!" Marcus hollered.

The door crashed on the ground beneath the balcony. Halfrida strolled past the exposed doorway. From the balcony, she observed the guerrillas continuing to stand their ground against the Underground military police garrisons. Disciplined and well-trained, the guerrillas butchered infantry and totaled MAFVs unlucky enough to cross the bridge.

Machine gunners fed hundreds of rounds into their MG34 light machine guns. Their bullets ripped through the bodies of a new wave of Underground reinforcements. AT killer teams slung iPhone-sized rounds from PTRS-41 AT rifles, while others lobbed shape-charged warheads from Panzerschreck rocket launchers. Accurate and precise, the AT killers massacred an approaching MAFV column, turning them into a small junkyard that obstructed the tunnels ahead.

Joyous tears fell out of Halfrida's eyes. Nothing stoked her euphoria more than the present moment. She cracked a smile. *We are witnessing the first steps in this noble, triumphant return to Ryanite greatness!* Halfrida laughed herself to death whilst watching the ongoing carnage and chaos ensuing at the bridge.

A new column of MAFVs rolled toward the Bridge. Import models of the new and devastating St. Magnus II/C, Medium MAFVs resembling Škoda 43M Turán IIIs, appeared. Their tall, slender coaxial turrets laid waste to Ryanites unfortunate enough to enter their sights.

Their chassis were painted matte-amber, a golden Sacred Heart of Jesus emblem adorning the sides of their turrets. With their big, wide treads, the Magnus II/Cs crushed the smoldering wreckage of the 'lesser-MAFV' tunnel impeding their triumphant march to spilling innocent Ryanite blood.

In their wake came a charging company of crack assault troopers wielding automatic assault rifles, grenade and rocket launchers, semi-automatic shotguns, and flamethrowers. "Death to the Ryanites!" they screamed, guns blazing. The golden Sacred Heart of Jesus patches on their sleeves marked them as the *Christus Rex*, Emperor Raynerson's Imperial Palace guards. The House of Raynerson sent Emperor Bernard's bodyguards, inhumane and fanatical veterans of the Rosy War.

"Dammit Renate, we got the *Christus Rex* on our asses!" Nathaniel voice blared out of Halfrida's two-way radio.

Halfrida reached for the handset. "What the hell does that mean?" Laser machine gun beams poked holes into the corrugated metal and sandbags. The enemy infantry's firepower forced Halfrida to keep her head down.

"Simple: Duchess Perpetua is coming for us!" Francis howled.

"We've got to fall back!" Marcus screamed.

"No, hold your ground!" she yelled.

"We can't!" Marcus shouted. "Our weapons cannot penetrate their armor!"

"Hang in there! I'm going to contact PE!"

"Be quick!" Francis wailed in pain.

"Medic!" Nathaniel called out.

One of the Magnus II/Cs flung a plasma bolt at Halfrida. The bolt ricocheted against a section of the cavern beneath the balcony. The vibration of the explosion rocked the balcony. Tuning her radio to Ulrich's frequency, she ducked under the sandbags and held the handset close to her ear. "Plaid Eminence, this is Renate, do you read me?"

***

Wonderland, the subterranean capital, was comprised of twenty four large caverns countless miles beneath Philadelphia and its suburbs. A massive shantytown of two-story shacks dotted the entire central cavern. A labyrinthine maze of tunnels, their walls lit with columns of fluorescent lights, connected the other caverns to the central hub.

Sonic roars emanated from one of the tunnels leading away from Wonderland. An unmarked matte-black St. Francis of Assisi Fr101F-2, a multirole A-Wing patterned after the Focke-Wulf Fw190D-9, zoomed through the tunnel. The spinner at the front of the fuselage, painted white, sported a black counter-rotating spiral. The tail fin bore eighty of so white slash marks, each slash representing downed A-Wings.

Cousin Ulrich piloted it from an undisclosed location. His headset and visor wired his central nervous system to a camera built into the Fr101F-2's cockpit. Shielded by a bubbletop canopy, the camera provided him with real-time images of a tunnel that seemingly spanned forever.

His hand shaking, he tightened its grip around the joystick. *I don't know what's creepier, this tunnel or killing myself by crashing my A-Wing into a wall somewhere?* Like all MAFVs, A-Wings utilized the same Anomaly-derived technology. The complete destruction of the vehicle subjected users to a comatose state, followed by death.

The radio in his headset crackled. "Plaid Eminence, this is Renate," Halfrida spoke over the growing static. "Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear," he answered.

"How are you holding up?"

"Nervous." The tunnel swerved rightward. Ulrich weaved his A-Wing to avoid hitting a steel blast door. "*Verdammt*, I wonder how these Dwellers could fly their A-Wings without crashing them!"

"Flying in a tunnel is different from flying in the sky," she said. "Those Dwellers have turned the concept into an actual skill, by the way."

"Their flight instructors are either insane or stupid then," Ulrich mused.

"It's all a matter of perspective," she told him.

A darkened abyss greeted him at end of the tunnel. *How encouraging*, he thought. Occasional flashes from discharged weapons lit up the cavern up ahead. Ulrich switched on his headset's infrared vision instead of regular night vision. The infrared shaded all heat signatures around his A-Wing bright red, while the rest of the world turned pitch-black.

From a distance, West-Emory Bridge came within view. The IR vision detected a large column of enemy MAFVs crossing it. The bridge grew bigger and bigger the closer Ulrich got to the cavern. "I'm closing in on the bridge, Renate."

"Blow it up!" Halfrida cried over the sounds of explosions and screaming voices in the background.

Ulrich's Fr101 flew into the cavern. He changed the IR to night vision. The cavern lit up in varying shades of bright green. His hands sweaty, Ulrich circled the A-Wing around the bridge, evading the cavern walls and enemy fire as best as he could. An energy blast struck the fuselage of the Fr101. The impact violently shook his body. *Verdammt!*

The IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) on his headset's Heads-Up Display beeped with a loud screeching sound. It locked onto the center of the Bridge, marked by a green diamond within a matching-colored box. Diving toward the bridge from the ceiling, a red diamond appeared within the green box.

"That should do it, Cousin!" Halfrida shouted.

"Target acquired!" On the joystick, Ulrich flipped the plastic crown open with his thumb and pressed down on a glowing red button. The Fr101 came too to the bridge. He pulled the joystick towards his chest to regain altitude.

The Fr101 dropped two precision-guided bombs over the Bridge before rapidly ascending. A deafening explosion rocked the whole cavern. The bombs, each weighing two thousand pounds of high-explosive, smacked the bridge and blew up. Parts of destroyed MAFVs and human corpses flew up in midair. Ulrich's Fr101 weaved past them as he flew away from the cavern.

The bridge split into two, the debris fell into the chasm below, taking with it other knocked-out Magnus II/C MAFVs and dead *Christus Rex* soldiers. The debris splashed into the rushing water, the water carrying it away from the cavern.

Halfrida observed the destruction with a pair of binoculars, perched atop a balcony above the eastern tunnels. After Ulrich destroyed the bridge, she reached into her satchel and whipped out a two-way radio handset. Duchess Perpetua greeted her on the other end. "Halfrida," Perpetua growled, "You're a dead girl, you know that?"

"I do," she retorted. "And you know what? I feel like we need to revise the terms of that LRRH Cartel Charter. The terms are just a continuation of the Peace Treaty that ended the Rosy War."

"How could you say this after what just happened?" Perpetua yelled.

Halfrida snickered. "Then let my Cousin Ulrich do the talking for me."

"Does he know where the Imperial Palace is?"

"I'm sure he does."

"Tell him to take a Teleportation Transponder to the Palace's dining hall. Make sure he meets me alone, got it?"

"Yes, of course," Halfrida replied. She switched the radio off.

Chapter Seven: Never Forget, Pt. I

(Ryanite Chorus; February 28th-March 20th, 2012)

"You may dazzle the mind with a thousand brilliant discoveries of natural science; you may open new worlds of knowledge which were never dreamed of before; yet, if you have not developed in the soul of the pupil strong habits of virtue which will sustain her in the struggle of life, you have not educated her, but only put in her hand a powerful instrument of self-destruction."

-St. Rose Philippine Duchesne

Dawn rose to greet the city of Boston on a dreary, foggy morning in late February. In Otherworld, a carbon-copy of Earth in an alternate dimension, 'Other-Boston' housed the capital of the Catholic School Underground. Dusk arrived to Other-Boston and the shores of Eden, Otherworld's North America. A strong of wind blew from the west. The darkening sky lit up under a full moon and litany of stars.

West of the Underground capital, an airfield over a mile long protected itself behind tall concrete walls. Guard towers sporting machine guns and searchlights stared down the perimeter. A dirt road to a security checkpoint on the eastern wall connected the installation to the rest of the Underground. Rows upon rows of hangars, barracks, and other buildings housed A-Wings, personnel, munitions and other equipment. A control tower at the center overlooked two long airstrips.

Emperor Bernard, his wife, Empress Benita, and the House of Raynerson resided at their Inner Sanctum in the lower levels of the complex. In the west wing formal dining hall, Lady Ostara and Duchess Perpetua sat beside each other, chatting. Empress Benita sipped on fine wine and feasted on well-done venison on the right-hand corner of the table.

"*Der Führer* will return at a certain point after someone slams some planes into all the right buildings in America!" Ostara fawned in orgasmic joy over Adolf Hitler. "Every race, nation, and creed will welcome him and his *Tausendjährige Reich* ('Thousand-Year Reich') with open arms!"

Perpetua froze, covering her mouth, reflecting on the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Terrifying images of two passenger planes crashing into the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center blew her skull open. "Wait, are you saying those nineteen hijackers fulfilled one of Hitler's darkest fantasies?"

"I'm afraid so," Ostara confessed. "Albert Speer reported in his book, *Spandau: The Secret Diaries,* the *Führer* dreamed of striking New York and killing lots of *Juden* by slamming planes into skyscrapers."

"That's got to be a conspiracy theory, Matilde." Perpetua banged the long table with a clenched fist.

Ostara laughed. "This is not a conspiracy theory, Your Highness. Herr Speer was not a conspiracy theorist and neither are Reuters and *Der Spiegel.* For German political scientist Matthias Küntzel cited those publications in *Djihad und Judenhaß* ('*Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11*')."

"Interesting." One of Perpetua's eyebrows rose. "Okay, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt."

"*Danke Schön*." Ostara thanked her with a wolfish grin. "I find it intriguing how those Twin Towers acted like two tall magnets for Anti-Semites and National Socialists. A 1995 New York Times article reported that Ramzi Yousef's motive in the 1993 WTC bombing was actually intended to assassinate a 'Zionist official.'"

Duchess Perpetua sipped on a glass of white wine. She savored the beverage, the sweet taste as it went down. "What's the name of the article?"

"'Trade Center Bombing Suspect Says Aim was Killing of 'Zionist.'"

Perpetua stroked her chin. "Okay, go on…"

"In the prosecution of Mounir el-Motassadeq, Shahid Nickels, a German Muslim convert, testified in court that Mohamed Atta had a National Socialist *Weltanschauung* ('Worldview'). Atta believed that the *Juden* were running the world and that America served as the heart of World Jewry."

Perpetua's jaw dropped. "Holy crap…t-that's the 'Zionist Occupation Government' (ZOG) espoused by White Nationalists!" She froze for a few seconds. "That means Mohamed Atta shares same the *Weltanschauung* as Robert Jay Mathews and David Lane of the Order, Pastor Richard Butler of Aryan Nations, and Thomas Metzger of White Aryan Resistance."

Ostara giggled. "And as for Osama Bin Laden, you ask?"

"So, wait, Bin Laden's…?"

Ostara nodded her head. "Consider Osama Bin Laden's November 2002 'Letter to the American People'. In it, Bin Laden wrote: 'the Jews have taken control of your economy, through which they have then taken control of your media, and now control all aspects of your life making you their servants and achieving their aims at your expense.'"

"This is surreal…," she shivered in terror. "It's like Bin Laden took the words out of your freaking mouth!"

"Reality is stranger than fiction," Ostara giggled. "For in the *NS-Bewegung* ('National Socialist Movement'), we have a saying: '*ein Roman voller Wirklichkeiten*' ('a novel full of realities')."

She smirked. "Real prescience is Bessie 'Two Gun' Rebecca Burchett in 1939 suggesting that the *Führer* invade America and 'drop a bomb on the right place in New York.' Apparently, to her, the Empire State Building is full of *Juden*."

"Where'd you find that?" Perpetua pondered.

"A book by Phillip Jenkins, entitled, *Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania 1925-1950*," Ostara answered. "The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill published that book in 1997."

Ostara continued. "That being said, real prescience is Dr. William Pierce of the National Alliance circulating *The Turner Diaries* in 1978, with a passage featuring Earl Turner, the main character, crashing his plane into the Pentagon."

The grainy CCTV footage of American Airlines Flight 77 ramming into the Pentagon flooded Perpetua's mind and left goosebumps on her ivory skin.

"Wasn't *The Turner Diaries* the same book Timothy McVeigh used as inspiration to blow up the Murrah Federal Building in 1995?"

"*Jawohl*." Ostara nodded. "But Biggie Smalls, in his 1994 hit 'Juicy,' rapping about getting paid and blowing up like the World Trade Center *isn't* prescient. Those 9/11 Truthers don't know what the hell they're talking about."

"They don't." Perpetua cocked her head, frowning. "I can't believe it: the 'War on Terror' is the continuation of World War II under a new name…," she murmured, her chin tilted down. "And the Rosy War is a part of it…" She eyed Ostara. "What were the Brotzmans doing on 9/11?"

Ostara drew a blank. "Curiously, nobody knows where the Brotzman family was on that day, yet I've heard rumors..." She tapped her jackboot on the floor a few times, trying to remember. "Promise you can keep a secret?"

"Sure," she retorted.

"Harold and Halfrida were said to have been at Windows on the World and fled New York mere minutes before American Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower. Both twins were four years old at the time."

"What about their parents?"

"They were working at the Cross Financial Unlimited Building, a block away from the World Trade Center. I went there around the same time as Flight 11."

"And where was Horst Brotzman? What was he doing on that day?"

"I don't know." Ostara shook her head, smiling. "I can't tell you."

Perpetua's eyes narrowed. *How suspicious.*

***

(*One day later*)

Cousin Ulrich took a Teleportation Transponder to the Imperial Palace at the behest of Halfrida. A Teleportation Transponder was placed across from the dining long table. The upper half of the rectangular device began to extend itself upward and rotated counterclockwise with incredible speed. A golden door levitated above the device. The door opened by itself, the body of a teenage boy standing upright with a briefcase materialized in front of the device.

Duchess Perpetua, seated in the same chair last night, narrowed her eyes.

"We meet again," he announced, smiling.

"'Halfrida's Brain', I presume?" she sipped on a glass of Scotch. She slammed the glass on the table.

"Be careful," Empress Benita called out from the far-right side of the table.

"'Fräulein Carpetbagger', I believe?" he snorted.

"So I hear," she spoke. "Let's talk business, shall we?" She motioned Ulrich to sit on the vacant chair in front of him.

Eyes squinted, Ulrich nodded his head. "*Jawohl*…," he muttered under his throat. Once seated, he set the briefcase on the table and unlocked the handcuffs, freeing his hand from the briefcase's handle.

"Listen." Perpetua pointed a finger at him. "I know what kind of person you are. You're the type who'd appease and compromise with neo-Nazis."

"*Was*?" Ulrich's eyebrows rose. "That's a lie!"

"I beg to differ," Perpetua snapped. "Your grandfather, I fear, is responsible for most of the evils in this world."

"Perhaps," Ulrich admitted, "But what my Opa does is not what I believe." He crossed his arms. "I have spent my life thus far opposing what he has done. I know it may not be much, but it has indeed garnered the resentment of my other cousins."

"How so?" Perpetua asked.

"Whereas some of my cousins gladly accepted their future as heirs to my Opa's legacy, I refused," Ulrich elaborated. "The same was also true for my Cousins Harold and Halfrida and their Opa."

"Then tell me why are you supporting Harold and Halfrida's ambitions?" Perpetua questioned. "Don't you realize that those two are up to no good?"

"I don't see anything wrong about righting the wrongs imposed by the Rosy War," Ulrich answered. "First of all, why don't you tell me about that war?"

"The Rosy War was as much a geopolitical conflict as it was an educational one." Perpetua poured a carton of lime juice into a wine glass. Putting the carton down, she picked up the half-full glass and sipped. "You see, my family was concerned about the state of Catholic Education in America and around the Real World. We've been like that for generations, and thus believed war was necessary."

"How, and on what basis?" Ulrich's eyes narrowed.

"You call yourself a Brotzman, yet still don't understand why my family fought?" Duchess Perpetua smacked the dining table with a clenched fist and cackled at the top of her lungs. "Was that supposed to be a joke?"

Ulrich shook his head. "*Nein*, Your Highness, for I am a very stern boy." He folded his hands on the table.

"Whatever." She downed her lime juice and set the wine glass down.

"Anyway, you were saying?"

Perpetua continued. "Back in 1991, my family and their Dweller allies discovered the Otherworld and its Anomalies. Even then, Anomalies were as lucrative as they are now. It would be foolish of my family and the Catholic School Underground to not cash in. After all, what motivates my family the most?"

"Well, I understand that your family is a staunch supporter of Catholic homeschooling." He leaned back in his chair. "I also know that the Underground believes Catholic Education as we know it is dead and must be reborn according to their designs."

"But even you should know that we Raynersons never got into that bandwagon overnight." Duchess Perpetua pointed her finger at his chest. "It was part of a long process, a sign to your family that we were no longer willing to play ball with their pro-Nazi agenda."

"That's understandable." Ulrich nodded. He rolled his eyes away from her. "I make no bones that my family is still conspiring to rebuild the Third Reich."

"Well, duh, of course!" she shouted. "That's why they sided with the Remnants during the Rosy War, by preventing Underground from getting in on the Anomalies. That's why my family waged war with Neudeutschland for eight

years. And now Lady Ostara, your family's most trusted patsy, wants to fight a new war."

"Am I supposed to assume your uncle, Emperor Raynerson, has no regrets for the millions of men, women, and children who died?" Ulrich crossed his arms. "Give me a freaking break!" He sulked in disgust. "What we did back in Concord Harbor is just another example of Raynerson family skullduggery! Ostara may have had something to gain, but that coup d'état was yours all along!"

"So what if it was?"

"Are you admitting it?" Ulrich's left eye twitched.

"Yes!" Perpetua nodded. "Hey, I wanted to court favors with Howard Wolff as much as your cousins and all the rest." She crossed her legs. "We all know that the US government is our biggest customer in Anomalies. If Uncle Sam wants Anomalies for cash, who the hell says we can't use that money to support Catholic homeschooling initiatives?"

"But with our hands stained with the blood of millions?"

"Does it even make a difference on who lives and who dies?"

"Jawohl, it does matter!" Ulrich yelled. "Maybe I don't want to equate the lives innocent Dwellers as mere numbers on a ledger." He banged his fist against the table and pointed at Duchess Perpetua. "It seems to me that you are nothing more than a Godforsaken Pharisee! How dare you call yourself a 'Heroine of Catholic Education', Your Highness!"

"Oh, come on, how does condescending make you any better than me?" Perpetua shrieked. "Your family got rich from the Holocaust and supported rogue dictatorships around the freaking Real World!"

"But that was my grandmother, not me!" He pounded on his chest. "At least I had the balls to say I wanted nothing to do with him! "

She leaped out of her chair and slammed her fists against the table. The table shook, the empty wine glass wobbled. "Liar! How can you claim to support Catholic Education by blackmailing the entire USCCB into submission?"

He shouted back. "*Nein*, answer my questions first!"

"Enough," Empress Benita screamed, "Both of you!" She exchanged brief glances with the two youths. "What happened yesterday has no bearing on what happens today."

"I'm sorry, My Lady, but I beg to differ." Ulrich sat back on the chair with his arms folded, leaning against the backrest. "While it's true the old government of Neudeutschland was malevolent, I cannot stand by and let someone equate Ryanites as being the same as neo-Nazi Remnants."

Empress Benita laughed at them. "Neither of you are any better than other. We're all sinners, and that's what makes us human. To me, both of you are eager to rot in Hell if it means family, friends, and the Church will reign in paradise."

"Okay, what's your point?" Ulrich demanded.

Acknowledge your faults, get back to negotiations, and quit this damn bickering!" Empress growled. "I've heard enough already!" She tilted her chin upward and hollered: "Housemaids, get this idiot out of our sight!"

Two housemaids, standing on opposite ends of a doorway with their backs against the wall, rushed up to Ulrich and grabbed him by the arms. Kicking and screaming, Ulrich struggled to break from their grasp. The housemaids threw him into the Teleportation Transponder, sending Ulrich back to where he came.

Another housemaid, lingering on other side of the dining hall, approached the briefcase Ulrich left behind. Unbeknownst to Duchess Perpetua and Empress Benita, it was Halfrida, posing as a housemaid at the Imperial Palace. She picked up the briefcase and proceeded to leave the room. *Thanks for the money, Cousin.*

***

(*Five days later*)

South Philly's Ss. John Neumann and Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic High School opened in the 1920s, built out of an old parish for German immigrants and German-Americans since the 1840s. The imposing Neo-Gothic school building stood three stories tall, its campus stretching across ten acres of land.

'Neumann-Seton', as it was often called, served as a personal testbed for Cousin Ulrich to live up to his childhood moniker, 'His Plaid Eminence'. As the brains behind Harold's silver tongue and Halfrida's military brilliance, he made kept his twin cousins focused on pursuing tangible objectives with pragmatism and realism. That meant applying their theoretical ideas at Neumann-Seton.

The morning sun rose over the horizon beyond Delaware River and the busy roads along I-95. Hundreds of cars raced up and down the interstate roads behind the school campus. The snow had melted by the end of February. Doors locked from outside. Windows shuttered. The parking lot lay empty. For days, students had not a single class while their teachers were on strike outside the downtown Archdiocesan offices.

This morning was the perfect opportunity for work on a special extracurricular activity: building an A-Wing airfield. In the sports fields behind the school building, hundreds of students poured slabs of concrete over small sections of topsoil. Some dropped to their knees and smoothened out the still-gooey mixture before it hardened.

Other groups of students constructed small, miniature hangars beside the slabs of concrete. They bolted down the foundations before putting the steel walls and roofs into place with welding torches.

A group of girls constructed an air traffic control tower next to a Raytheon JPALS (Joint Precision Approach and Landing System) device. A military-grade all-weather GPS, the JPALS was modified for the remote guidance of A-Wing takeoffs and landings. It stood erect on a sturdy matte-black tripod. A girl kneeled next to its rectangular base, adjusting knobs and rewiring plugs.

From afar, Cousin Ulrich stood alone next to some outdoor bleachers, observing the Neumann-Seton Ryanites with a pair of binoculars. He was dressed in the school's male uniform: white dress shirt, a black blazer, matching necktie, dress pants, and a pair of polished oxfords. A pair of doors to the school gymnasium stood behind him.

One of the doors sprang open. Halfrida marched out of the gymnasium with Lance, Eddie Mack, and Victor Gordon in tow. She was dressed in the female uniform of her twin brother's Catholic high school, Bishop Dowell. White dress shirt, light-gray sweater vest, dark-gray necktie, a knee-length khaki skort, white knee socks, and a pair of polished black oxfords.

Ulrich pulled the binoculars away from his eyes. A leather strap around his neck left the binoculars dangling over his chest. He turned around and smiled at Halfrida. "Cousin," he greeted Halfrida, embracing her in his arms. "It's so good to be seeing you again. I was hoping we'd be able to see each other without someone getting shot every three seconds."

"But that's life," she giggled.

Victor waved his hand at Ulrich. "Morning, Ulrich."

"Morning," Ulrich said, waving back at him.

"It's been a quite a while since you've seen us, Ulrich," Eddie said to him, cracking a smile. "Didn't think I'd see you again after whacking King Percy."

"Likewise," Ulrich retorted. "Say, how's your family's Trading House doing these days, Eddie?"

"The other Trading Houses in the Western Commonwealth thought they could bleed me dry." Eddie folded his arms and frowned. "Who the hell does Duchess Perpetua and that Yakuza princess of hers think I am?" He held out his arms and raised his voice. "I'm not a cow!"

Lance nodded his head with a wide grin. "True, true," he mumbled.

What's Eddie whining about? Ulrich's eyes narrowed. "'Yakuza Princess'…?"

Halfrida whispered into his ear. "He's talking about Samantha Nakajima," she clarified. "Nakajima-san is Duchess Perpetua's lieutenant of the Japanese Mafia, the Yakuza. Rumor has it, during World War II, her family and the Yakuza got an industrial vacuum cleaner and sucked all the wealth out of the Asian criminal underworld."

"Interesting…," he muttered. "That sounds no different than what our family was doing in Europe at the time."

She rolled her eyes and tugged her bottle-blonde tresses. "Come on, Cousin, the Nakajimas made our efforts look petty and inefficient by comparison. That family was psychotic enough to have 'Three Alls'…" Halfrida held up a finger on one hand as she went. "'Kill all, burn all, loot all.'"

The family's influence stretched far and wide, its power intimidating her at Neumann-Seton. She shuddered. "I swear to the Almighty God that that family should have died in their home when the Fat Man descended into Nagasaki."

Don't tell me you're afraid of organized crime, Cousin. Ulrich chuckled. "We shouldn't have to worry about the Yakuza, ja?" He crossed his arms.

"There's reason for us to worry," she stressed. "The global trade in Anomalies from the Otherworld is a small one." She paced back and forth around Ulrich, her hands behind her back. "Imagine: Governments, militaries, intelligence agencies, think-tanks, corporations, NGOs, organized crime syndicates, terrorist groups, and drug cartels waiting in line for their own Anomaly."

"Refined Anomalies have great industrial applications," Ulrich blurted. "They're also good for increasing the potency of weapons and equipment."

"That's right!" Halfrida nodded, pointing her finger at him. "And Duchess Perpetua is using her family's connections to organized crime to build up a slush fund to rearm her personal army inside Underground….give them an edge over us in our inevitable war." She leaned next to the bleachers behind Ulrich.

He stroked his chin. *I think I can see where this is heading.* "So," he pondered, "What should we do in response to that?"

She paused for a few minutes. "…That might just work…," she mumbled to herself. The lightbulb inside her skull exploded and engulfed her brain in flames. "I think I know what need to do."

"Does it have something to do with these three?" Ulrich gestured at the three boys lingering behind the bleachers.

"You got it." She snapped her fingers and straightened her posture. "Listen, Victor Gordon has friends who know people who can provide the Ryanites with some heavy military-grade firepower."

"And who's that?" he cocked his head to the side.

"Victor's friends know some Remnants living and working inside an abandoned industrial park outside of Philadelphia," Halfrida replied. "I'm talking arms dealers, veterans of the Rosy War."

"It's that the best we got?" He scratched the back of his head.

"Either that or we talk to Victor former IRA cousins and uncles in Ireland." Halfrida crossed her arms and sighed. "I'm sure they got some working Ak-47 knockoffs that Gaddafi sent them thirty years ago."

"Nein, nein." Ulrich shook his head. "I think we should focus on people we can trust like those war veterans." He and Halfrida returned to the three boys, bored to death by their long conversation.

"Can we go now?" Lance complained. "I'm tired of all this waiting."

"And while we're at it," Victor chimed, "Is there's a McDonald's or a Chick-Fil-A somewhere nearby?" His belly rumbled.

"How about it?" Eddie Mack smiled, head cocked to the side.

"Let's pay a visit to those arms dealers," Ulrich told the boys. "It doesn't hurt to see what they got for sale."

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(*Fourteen days later*)

Fake News reported on Cousin Ulrich and Halfrida's latest exploits in the March 20 edition of *Peace Through Strength!*. A black and white slide followed. *Catholic Education Awakes*, it ran. The royal coat of arms of Johannes Cardinal Wolk of Philadelphia was shown below it.

"The Catholic bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) convene at the Fourth Plenary Council of Baltimore." The newsreel showed the bishops inside a large conference room somewhere in Baltimore. A montage of back and forth arguments between the rest of the conference and

various bishops and archbishops aligned with Johannes Cardinal Wolk. The music drowned their speeches and bickering.

One clip showed Cardinal Wolk standing up from his chair, motioning his like-minded clergymen to do the same. His Eminence, as President of the Conference, proceeded to leave as an act of defiance over a recent decision by the other bishops. The other bishops opposed to His Eminence shook their heads and rolled their eyes. "Things over there may take a while," Fake News spoke.

A second black and white slide appeared with the image of a soaring dove below the slide's title. *The Ryanite Dove Rises*, the title read.

"Backed by the Brotzmans and *allied* Catholic bishops, American Catholic schools up and down the nation undergo a massive series of infrastructural upgrades," Fake News proclaimed. "Schools built almost a century ago are now brought up to current building codes." A clip depicted the lower forty-eight states as multiple dots popped up with each passing second, the dots representing individual Catholic schools.

The newsreel showed Ryanite construction crews, in the middle of the night, erecting airfields for A-Wings, complete with miniature hangars to accommodate them. Another clip showed other crews installing elevators to deep-underground bunkers with entranceways connected to tunnels that went to the Dweller World.

Several clips showed a tunnel boring machine, tall as a huge dump truck, shooting jet streams of molten plasma at a wall of bedrock. The plasma melted away the bedrock, creating the shape of a new tunnel after hardening. That same tunnel was later shown with a high-speed train speeding through it like a rocket.

The locomotive, reinforced with layers of welded armor, hauled several train passenger cars and beds of MAFVs covered in tarp. The train passed by a large glowing sign. The camera panned to get a clear view of what the sign read, in German Gothic letters: *Welcome to the Ryanite capital of Wonderland.*

"At Wonderland," Fake News stated, "A modernization program is enacted to restore its once impressive industries." A clip showed Henry MacDonald and Nadine Bianchi wearing hard hats, gas masks, and hazmat suits, each holding a set of blueprints.

"Here, we see the mayor of Wonderland whipping the citizenry into shape," Fake news added. Another clip showed Henry shouted into a portable loudspeaker, barking at construction crews working outside of the camera's view.

Snippets of footage featured a brief montage of various public works projects in Wonderland. Anomaly refineries, factories, workshops, roads, and European-style homes were shown in various stages of construction. Quiet moves to build an economic powerhouse securing absolute autarky for American Catholic Education were already underway.

'Siegfried's Funeral March' from Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* blared in the fourth slide. *Welcome to the Fourth Reich?* it read. Below the text were scurrying bands of rats dressed like Brownshirts, some holding Vexilloid banners bearing Nazi ensigns.

Halfrida and Lady Ostara stood in front of a conference table inside the Lower Manhattan high-rise corporate boardroom of Cross Financial Unlimited. The girls raised their right hands above their shoulder. They shook each other's hands. "Oh my God, a 'marriage of convenience' has been struck earlier this week!" Fake News shouted. "The 'Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact' of our age is here!"

The Ryanites were given the Weimar treatment. Dozens of Catholic high schools witnessed hundreds clashing in vulgar cafeteria brawls. Mass expulsions in the tens of thousands followed. Entire school libraries stripped of anything perceived as 'un-Catholic' and burned at big bonfires in the middle of the night. Rumors of 'peculiar happenings' emanated out of the school hallways.

The newsreel ended with a terrifying montage. Like scenes out of East Germany prior to Reunification, Remnants neo-Nazis crawled out of America's woodwork like cockroaches with US citizenship. They sowed chaos, division, and confusion all over the United States.

Politicians and officials assassinated with bullets and bombs. Cyber raids struck Wall Street, stealing trillions from the US economy, almost plunging America and the rest of the world into a second Great Depression. TV-guided cruise missiles slammed into federal buildings. Radar-guided energy weapons microwaved other buildings, disintegrating everything inside them into huge plumes of dust.

A red light with the words 'DEFCON 2' glowed in darkness. "For the first time since 9/11 and the Cuban Missile Crisis," Fake News warned. "America's nuclear forces are now on the highest state of alert." The newsreel showed clips of US B-52, B-1, and B-2 bombers and submarines laden with nuclear weapons converging on Russia and China. "And they're ready to start the Apocalypse."

Chapter Eight: Bait And Bleed
(His Plaid Eminence; March 20th-April 20th, 2012)

"Your Greatness, we cannot sit by and let the Brotzmans rearm the Ryanites under our watch. We need to act decisively or else we lose our ill-gotten gains from the Rosy War!"

-Duchess Perpetua, speaking to Emperor Bernard

Galfrida left Cousin Ulrich an early birthday present about four weeks before his fourteenth birthday. A shortwave radio connected laptop with a special computer program, 'SuperEnigma.exe', installed. SuperEnigma was an impenetrable Intranet network shared between the Remnants, Ryanites, Dwellers, Underground, and others. Unlike its predecessor, the Enigma machine, its triple-layered wall of revolutionary encryption methods rendered it inaccessible to anyone operating outside the Anomaly trade.

Ulrich sat at a table inside a hotel room somewhere in Los Angeles. The lights were left on, the curtains obstructing the windows. Following her directions, he moved the cursor to the desktop icon and ran the program. He turned on the radio. A Top 40 song blared out of the speakers.

He turned down the volume and switched the frequency from FM to AM. Static replaced that bland, disorienting song. *That's better*, he thought.

Tilting his head at a digital alarm clock on the nightstand behind his chair, he glanced at the time. The red numbers '10:00' were displayed on the clock, a red dot next to a 'PM' marker. *Any second now…*, he swore to himself.

Prussian military music thundered out of the speakers amidst waves of static. It was Felix Draeseke's '*Germania-Marsch*' in A Minor. With one hand holding a fountain pen over a notepad, Ulrich adjusted a knob to triangulate the actual frequency. The reception grew clearer and clearer until the music stopped.

A teenage girl's voice barked in German with a deadpan tone. "ACHTUNG, ACHTUNG…!" Slowly, she shouted a long sequence of numbers. "VIER, DREI, ACHT, SIEBEN, SIEBEN, VIER, SIEBEN, DREI, NEUN, NULL, NEUN, EINS, FUNF, SIEBEN, ACHT, ZWEI, FUNF, FUNF, ACHT, NEUN, DREI, NEUN, VIER, FUNF, SECHS, DREI, NEUN, ACHT, SECHS, FUNF, FUNF, SECHS…!"

She continued with a second sequence. "ZWEI, EINS, ACHT, ACHT, VIER, EINS, NEUN, EINS, FUNF, SIEBEN, ZWEI, NEUN, ACHT, SECHS, ZWEI, DREI, FUNF, ACHT, VIER, NEUN…!"

The girl went on to repeat the same sequences a second time. "ICH WIEDERHILE…!" At the end of both sequences, she ended the transmission by saying 'zero' six times and 'end' twice. "NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL…ENDE…ENDE…!" Germania-Marsch in A Minor returned and continued playing on loop until the next transmission at 11PM PST.

Ulrich jotted down the girl's numbers on the notepad. From the pad, he ripped out another sheet of paper. This second sheet had a printed set of numbers. He compared his handwritten sheet and the printed one side by side.

The first sheet, the one he had written, were fifty-two digits organized into eight columns of four: *4387 / 7473 / 9091 / 5782 / 5589 / 3945 / 6398 / 6556 / 2188 / 4191 / 5729 / 8623 / 5849*.

The second sheet, the printed one, was formatted the same way, but with a different set of digits: *3179 / 8468 / 5741 / 3569 / 9246 / 5672 / 2494 / 2345 / 5256 / 3184 / 6723 / 9235 / 7452*. It was a cipher to the code he needed to crack.

Ulrich shook his head at the two sheets of paper. *Cousin, I can't believe you're insulting my intelligence with simple arithmetic*, he thought. On the handwritten sheet, he added both sets of numbers and doubled-checked to make sure that he did not carry the one for every ten.

The final sum revealed a new column of fifty-two digits. Ulrich jotted them beside the original fifty-two. *7456 / 5831 / 4732 / 8241 / 4725 /8517 /8782 / 8891 / 7334 / 7275 / 1442 / 7858 / 2291*, he wrote.

Years of experience encrypting and decrypting one-time pad messages became another language no different than Portuguese or English for Ulrich. The message, unlike the numbers station, was transcribed in English. "'Go to San Fernando Valley,'" he whispered. "'Find Hannelore.'"

He smacked his hand against his forehead. *I guess there's a first time for everything.*

***

(*Three days later*)

Cousin Heinricka, in her ongoing escape from the law, fled to a gated community somewhere in San Fernando Valley for safe refuge, posing as an Underground Jackbooter. In the middle of the night, Ulrich scaled the walls of the gated community. He landed feet first on a patch of grass.

He stood up and gestured at Hannelore to join him.

Hannelore jumped off the wall and landed beside him.

"I thought this was Western Commonwealth territory," he whispered to her.

"It is," she whispered back, "But this place belongs to the Samantha Nakajima Trading House."

"Samantha Nakajima," he voiced, "Isn't she the one who represents Underground's Jackbooter interests among most SSEs?"

Hannelore nodded her head. "In other words, this is technically Underground territory to a certain degree."

"Underground has a presence here?"

"Right," she answered. "Duchess Perpetua's the one who oversees Nakajima's transactions and it just also happens that she's here as well. We better not create a disturbance while we're searching for Heinricka." She reached into her handbag and offered him a handgun. "Here, take this."

"What is it?"

"A .22LR High Standard HDM."

Ulrich wrapped his hand around the long, cylindrical silencer and took it from her. The stainless-steel handgun had been coated with phosphate, giving it a bluish-like appearance. The iron sights were painted with a faint green glow.

"Try not to use it too much," she warned. "That gun only has ten rounds."

"Why would I need it?"

"You never know." She looked at the time on her smartphone. A dim glow from the smartphone lit up her face. "It's almost 10:15PM, Ulrich. Hurry up and find her. We don't have all night."

Ulrich holstered the weapon. He pointed his finger at the street on his left. "Then meet me outside the gates."

She turned to the road on his right. "Look for a foreclosed house across from a house with all of its lights on."

He nodded. "Danke."

They scurried away, disappearing into the darkness of the night.

The streets of the gated community were quiet and devoid of human life. No late night strolls by unsuspecting residents. Cars parked on driveways. Lights switched off inside every house Ulrich came across.

Was I supposed to be glad that everyone's asleep right about now? He thought.

Somewhere, in the middle of a street across from a playground area, Ulrich's radio handset crackled. He took it out of his satchel, turned down the volume knob, and placed it next to his ear.

On the radio were the voices of several teenage girls, drowned out by a sea of static. Stepping onto the sidewalk next to the playground, he proceeded forward until the street ahead converged on an intersection.

The static began to dissipate, rendering the voices of the intercepted transmission to become clearer. Ulrich advanced and crossed the street to the sidewalk on the other side. The radio reception became crystal clear again, the static from earlier gone. The voices on the radio belonged to Duchess Perpetua Raynerson, Samantha Nakajima, and three other girls unknown to him.

"The Brotzmans are building guns and bombs, while my family is building refrigerators and houses," Perpetua lamented. "That's why I came to you, Samantha. I want you to farm out all of these contracts to various SSEs connected to the Western Commonwealth."

"You can count on me," Samantha responded.

The signal was transmitted from a large three-story house on the other side of the intersection. One of the roads to the intersection led to a dead end where the house was. The other road opposite of the one to the dead end led to a foreclosed house across from a house with well-lit windows.

Ulrich approached the foreclosed house from the sidewalk. He paid brief glances between it and the well-lit house. *This must be the place*, he thought. He hurried toward a fence to the foreclosed house's backyard and climbed over the fence, rolling into the grass. He got back on his feet and crept up the steps of the patio and leaned next to the wall of the backdoor.

Lord, please tell me it's unlocked. He placed his hand over the door knob and turned it. The knob had been locked into place. *Good thing I bought some lock picking tools with me*. Ulrich set his backpack down and retrieved a special lock pick resembling a hypodermic needle. Sticking the 'needle' into the keyhole, he pushed a shiny, smooth red button on the other end.

The lock pick heated up, the needle generating an energy beam that destroyed all the pins inside the lock, unlocking the door. When the lock pick went into a cooldown, Ulrich put the lock pick away, opened the door, and went inside.

The door led him to the house's living room. He flipped a switch on the wall next to the door. No furniture. Nobody was around. Ulrich proceeded into the kitchen and passed by the fridge. *If Hannelore is correct, there should be something inside this pantry*. He stopped in front of a door. *What's behind this door?*

Opening the door revealed a pantry with its shelves bare. He kneeled down and spotted tiny gaps that formed a neat square big enough to fit a grown human. A trapdoor was embedded on glossy tiled floor of the pantry. Blue and white tiles were cemented onto the plating of the trapdoor in an attempt to conceal it. A steel handle was painted blue to match the color of the tiles.

Ah, here it is. Ulrich pulled the trapdoor and found a ladder that went several stories down. *This better not take me all the way to the Dweller World*. He latched onto the ladder, closed the trapdoor, and climbed his way down. The air inside the crawlspace grew colder as he descended.

At the bottom of the ladder was a large concrete room full of disassembled MAFV mechanical parts, controllers and headsets, and a massive twenty foot tall MAFV from the Rosy War. An Underground-issue 'St. Thomas Aquinas Heavy MAFV', it bore an uncanny resemblance to a Soviet T-35. The chassis sported a large, long plasma cannon mounted on a coaxial turret, surrounded by four smaller turrets, each with an autocannon and a laser machine gun.

Ulrich whistled at the monstrosity. *Those things are all tough until a nimble A-Wing drops a bomb over it*. In front of the MAFV was a large door to accommodate it, a human-sized door standing beside it. Ulrich went to the latter door and exited the room.

The corridors outside the garage were large and long enough for a Boeing 757 passenger jet to fly into. Fluorescent lights lit up the corridors, surveillance cameras around every bend and corner. Automated turrets with twin-mounted .50 Caliber machine guns placed behind sandbag walls. Doors locked behind retinal biometric scanners and keypad locks. Patrolling Western Commonwealth sentries pacing around the complex in squads, armed with Soviet-style AK-74 rifles and M4 Carbines.

Linear in their layout, all the countless corridors Ulrich encountered eventually led to a security checkpoint. Surveillance cameras at the checkpoint recognized his face, allowing him to proceed past the checkpoint to a steel blast door. The blast door opened itself.

A shopping mall of weapons was built deep into the hills near San Fernando Valley. Ran and operated by the five trading houses of the Western Commonwealth, Jackbooters from all over the planets ran stores and shops, selling weapons to the highest bidders. A few larger stores were MAFV and A-Wings dealerships with showrooms full of both.

One of the stores caught his attention. He glanced at its name. "Cyber-Arms Race," he whispered. *That might be it*. He walked straight in and explored the store's aisles, shelves laden with all sorts of computer software products.

Ulrich found Cousin Heinricka at Aisle 12, browsing a shelf. He approached her. "Cousin Heinricka," he spoke.

"Cousin Ulrich?" Heinricka turned to him, smiling. "It's nice to see you again." She hugged him. "You wouldn't believe what I found…"

"Tell me about it," he said.

***

(*Two weeks later*)

"Earth is not a huge place," Eddie Mack said to Ulrich, squatting down to place a golf ball atop a humble tee. He aligned his 8-iron next to the ball, eyes focused at a nearby hole. A red flag with a blue '18' fluttered over the hole. "Anybody who sells arms, or in this case, cyber-arms, would tell you as much."

Ulrich was invited to play a game of golf with Eddie, Victor Gordon, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Francis Leblanc somewhere in Florida. He stood by the golf caddy, watching the other boys placed their golf balls over their tees.

The other boys, at about the same time, swung their golf irons. Ulrich placed his hand over his eyes, observing the balls in midflight. The balls landed at various patches of grass, rolling a few inches up an inclined slope before stopping not far from Hole 18.

"Dammit, we were so close!" Francis threw his golf iron at the ground.

"But still a good try nonetheless," Nathaniel said to him.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Victor gestured at the flag over Hole 18.

Eddie nodded his head. He turned around and gestured at Ulrich. "Let's talk more on the way."

"Okay," Ulrich answered. He and the boys traveled across the golf course under the sweltering Florida sun.

The humidity left the air sticky and wet. Scattered clouds of white dotted the pale blue sky. A flying disc hovered within one of the clouds, snapping photos of Ulrich and the boys. A pair of US Navy F/A-18F jets scoured the skies, searching for the flying disc violating US airspace.

The twin-engines of the F/A-18Fs pierced Ulrich's ears. He covered his ears. The noise was a contrast, unlike the peaceful, calm propeller engines of the A-Wings he piloted. The American fighters flew away from the airspace above the golf course, their engines fading into the background.

"What were we talking about again?" Eddie called out.

Victor gazed at Ulrich. "We were talking about Ulrich's hatched plans to further the efforts of his Cousins Halfrida and Halfrida." He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "And how our end goal, the 'Greater American Catholic School System' (GACSS), is finally on the rise."

"Uh, was that all?" Nathaniel voiced.

Francis shook his head. "There's also the proposed diversification plans and the 'the most dangerous girl in the world.'"

The jet noises returned. The F/A-18s played cat and mouse with the flying disc, thousands of feet above the clouds. Ulrich covered his ears again. *Why are we playing golf at a country club not far from a US Navy airbase?*

"Quite a mouthful," Eddie spoke.

You think? Ulrich questioned him from the privacy of his thoughts. "I beg to differ," he told him. "All that is nothing compared to what my Cousins are doing these days."

"Where do we begin?" Victor chimed.

Nathaniel pointed his thumb at Ulrich. "Let the narrator of our story do all the leg work for us." He and the other boys paid brief glimpses at Ulrich on the way to Hole 18.

Ulrich scratched the back of his head. He resumed their original conversation. "With each passing day," he warned the boys, "The House of Raynerson and their Underground are going to topple GACSS in a possible war over the Anomaly deposits in Otherworld."

"No kidding," Francis added. "The entire Anomaly trade is bound to become a $750 trillion dollar a year industry Of course the Underground's going to fight us both tooth and nail."

"Para bellum," Nathaniel stated, "Para bellum."

"'If you want peace, prepare for war,'" Eddie opined.

"Genau," Ulrich responded. "Therefore, we're also going to need some potential allies to aid us in our struggle."

"That reminds me." Victor snapped his fingers. "I know the Underground is launching a global crusade to put homeschooling on a pedestal across the Catholic world. And I just happen to know certain people in Remnants intelligence who can get us in contact with various people in the Catholic world."

He turned to Ulrich. "I'll keep you and the others updated if anything important comes up."

"Please do," Ulrich stressed. "If all goes well, if the bishops at Fourth Plenary Council of Baltimore give the green light to the 'Republic Program', a war becomes inevitable."

The jet noises faded again. Peace and tranquility returned to restore order from chaos. "So where does that leave us?" Francis asked.

"Our diversification plans and what my Cousin Heinricka has learned before she came to this country," Ulrich replied. "We addressed all of our original plans from earlier, so let's talk about Heinricka instead."

"So what do we know about what she uncovered?" Eddie pondered.

The boys stopped in front of Hole 18, picking up their golf balls and placing them near the Hole. No longer interested in playing any more golf, they dragged the balls into the hole with their irons before turning to Ulrich.

Ulrich spoke to them. "My Cousin Heinricka, as you all know, is hiding from the law. But while in hiding she managed to uncover some vital intelligence that is of important interest to one of my other Cousins, namely, Halfrida."

"What did she find?" Nathaniel asked.

Ulrich paused. "Something tells me that Lady Ostara is up to something huge. And I have to agree with Heinricka on this one. If we and the Underground are going to war with each other, I don't think Ostara is going to be a bystander in all of this."

"You're right," Victor agreed.

"Even I find that plausible," Francis added.

"But we're going to need some airtight proof from her, Heinricka, that is," Eddie said. "Ulrich, could you do us a favor and talk to her for us? It's best that we get the most out of her testimony first before we could warn Halfrida."

Good idea. Ulrich nodded.

A flaming F/A-18F plummeted out of the sky, the pilot and weapons officer both bailing out seconds before the plane exploded. Ejection seats flew out of the cockpit, parachutes blooming in the air. The burning wreckage of the plane crashed into the boys' golf caddy, cratering the ground around it.

***

(*Two weeks later*)

In a forested area not far from an airport, Cousin Heinricka stood in front of a dirt trail, waiting for Cousin Ulrich. A laptop computer was strapped to her chest, the monitor halfway opened. Her eyes darted around the trees surrounding her. Jet engines roared in the distance.

Ulrich approached her with his hands behind his back. "*Alles Gute zum Geburtstag!*" He greeted.

She smiled. "*Ei*, so you remembered that today's my birthday."

"It's not that hard to remember," he said. "I mean, today's also the 123rd birthday of Adolf Hitler and you were also born at the exact same time as the Columbine massacre."

"I know, right?" she giggled. "By the way, Cousin, are you hiding my birthday gift behind your back."

He nodded. "I am." His hands were clutched together. He opened them, showing her a small removable data stick. "It's a reverse engineered copy of your old logic bomb. I thought it would make a nice birthday gift."

"*Danke*." Heinricka took it from his hands and stored it inside her satchel. She motioned him to have a stroll through the forest. "Let's take a walk."

The two cousins traveled along a dirt trail. The sun pierced the dense foliage and the branches of the trees. Squirrels scurried up and down the branches of various trees. Packs of grey wolves, grizzly bears, and black eagles stalked them. The sounds of a massive car crash echoed in the distance. A Boeing 747 passenger jet soared overhead, its engines screaming as it prepared to land at the airport.

"Cousin," Ulrich said, "What do we know and don't know?"

"There's a lot we haven't been told, Ulrich," Heinricka quipped. "Our Opa Horst is grooming us and our other Cousins, especially Harold and Halfrida." She stopped and darted her eyes all over the forest, looking for snipers and death squads hiding in the bushes. Apart from packs of animals stalking them, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

And here I was thinking Harold was crazy and paranoid, he thought. A tingling sensation ran down his spine. "You were saying?"

"Opa Horst is grooming us and our cousins to perpetuate Hitler's legacy upon the rest of humanity," Heinricka continued. "The fall of Nazi Germany was a serious setback. The fall of the Remnants' neo-Nazi government in Otherworld after the Rosy War was another." She and Ulrich resumed strolling. "And yet the legacy still lives on, here, on this Earth."

"So the suspicions Harold and I had last year or so were correct?"

She nodded. "Ja, this isn't a conspiracy theory! Go ask Opa yourself!"

"But back to these Remnants," Ulrich said. "You're saying that the Remnants are one just another part of a much larger plan?"

Again, she nodded.

"I thought they were just an offshoot?"

"More like a Plan C," she corrected him. "If Hitler was 'Plan A' and the Remnants 'Plan C', then whatever our Opa and Lady Ostara are up to could be the 'Plan B.'"

The path ahead of the cousins followed along a narrow, winding creek. The creek, dried of water a lifetime ago, was covered in large piles of fallen leaves from last autumn and dirt. A wooden bridge built over the creek. Ulrich and Heinricka stopped behind the bridge.

"Nein, you don't get it!" Heinricka whined. "The Americans, the Russians, the Chinese have been and are still being played by Opa Horst! Opa has spent his whole life pursuing Hitler's ambitions since he was our age eighty years ago!"

"Then why would Opa, an ϟϟ Colonel, do business with Americans, Argentinians, Chileans, Paraguayans, Brazilians, Soviets, Egyptians, Rhodesians, South Africans, Saudis, Israelis, Iraqis, Iranians, Afghanis, Chinese, Indonesians, Yakuza, North Koreans…?" Ulrich threw up his arms. "I don't get it! Where does it all end?"

"Some things are best left ambiguous," Heinricka reminded him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't tell me you're as clueless as Harold!" Heinricka crossed her arms.

"I'm serious, what are you implying by all of this?"

Heinricka paused. She took a deep breath and sighed. "Opa Horst wants to restore the old German Reich. Since 1945, he and various former Nazi officials have spent every waking moment getting the Fatherland out of the thumb of NATO, the EU, and the US government in Washington."

"Their goals were already outlined as far back as the 1950s." She held up one finger. "Forge good relations with nations in South America, Africa, the Middle East, Russia, and Asia, with the long-term goal of rebuilding German military-industrial capabilities."

She held up another. "The next goal is to curtail the diplomatic and financial power of the United States by manipulating its government."

"How's that supposed to happen?" Ulrich cocked his head to the side.

"'A combination of crises to plunge the US from dizzying heights,'" she replied, reciting a page from her Opa's 1950s manifesto. "You know what I'm talking about, don't you, Cousin?"

"I…think so," he mumbled. "Please continue."

Heinricka cited more passages from the manifesto. "Wage a coup d'état to seize the US government and its thermonuclear arsenal through a Reagan-era computer program. Fly some planes into the right places in New York and Washington, hijack American nukes, and cook some books while you're at it."

"'Persuade' American policy makers to wage wars of attrition guaranteed to destabilize the Middle East. Engineer an economic recession to shakedown too-big-to-fail banks such as Lehmann Brothers, Wachovia, J.P. Morgan-Chase Manhattan, Goldman Sachs, Bear Stearns, etc."

"What the hell are you smoking, Cousin?" Ulrich blushed.

She ignored his insult. "Threaten those too-big-to-fail banks with a cyber Great Depression or cyber 9/11 featuring 1,488 hijacked American thermonuclear warheads. 'Recalibrate' the nukes to hit the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, AIG, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and other mortgage companies dabbling in insurance and derivatives of bad subprime mortgages.'"

Sounds…familiar? Ulrich scratched his head in bewilderment.

"Make them all run off to the Bush administration and force the US government to pass the 'Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008' to give these people $1,000,000,000,000 in bailouts. Easy ransom money."

Everything she said sounds pretty recent, Ulrich thought. "Huh," he murmured. "I was wondering where Opa received the $1,000,000,000,000 that suddenly appeared in the family's Bank of International Settlements (BIS) account one day."

"In any case," Heinricka continued, "Opa wants to see to it that the 'cowboys' adopt a unipolar outlook." She held up her hands and held them apart, as if trying to form a section of the Berlin Wall. "Helping President Reagan and Vice President George H. W. Bush get rid of the Soviet Union, to 'tear down this wall', should be enough to get the ball going."

"And once the Soviet Union falls," Ulrich opined, snapping his fingers, "Conditions will be ripe for such an attitude to occur."

"*Natürlich*." She nodded. "In the end, all the pieces will come together in a big, major war that may engulf the entire Earth. America and Russia will annihilate each other in a big war, and Opa and others will seize the German government and restore the Third Reich. The result is a German-dominated Europe calling all the shots on planet Earth."

"That's crazy!" Ulrich said.

"But that's what our Opa's been doing since 1933!"

Chapter Nine: Chasing Rumors
(Renate; April 23th-May 28th, 2012)

"I'm telling you, Cousin, Lady Ostara is up to something. This Conspiracy of hers is worth probing further into."

-Halfrida Brotzman

Thick clouds blanketed the nighttime sky, blocking the moon's light. The city of Lincoln and its surrounding areas were encapsulated in darkness. Thunder rumbled, lightning bolts flashed overhead amidst a heavy downpour. The streets were emptied as the night dragged on. All the stores and other businesses in Lincoln remained closed behind lock and key.

The thunder and lightning grew more intense. Fluorescent lights flickered on and off inside a concrete parking garage, not far from a nearby shopping mall. A sixties-era Cadillac convertible, sporting a matte-black paintjob and tinted windows, was parked on the fourth floor. The Cadillac's engine was off. No other cars were parked nearby, the entire garage devoid of human life.

Halfrida drove her Porsche 993 Turbo coupé upward on an inclined slope from the floor below. Switching off the headlights, she turned left and drove past several rows of empty parking spaces. The Cadillac was waiting for her on the other side of the fourth floor. Parking the four-wheeled Panzer next to it, she kept the engine running, disembarked, and strutted up to the Cadillac.

The window on the right passenger door rolled downward. Francis Leblanc, Nathaniel Hawthorne's personal driver, waved his hand at her with shifty bloodshot eyes. "Oh, thank God you came."

Halfrida leaned her arm on the door. "Is he here?" she asked the driver.

Francis nodded his head. He pointed his thumb at the backseat.

Nathaniel, seated in the backseat of the Cadillac, ignited a single matchstick. The match brightened his pale, acne-covered face as he lit a Cuban cigar. "I'm here, Halfrida," he spoke before sticking the cigar between his lips. "Have a seat; we're going to be here for a while."

Halfrida nodded. She opened the door and sat in the front passenger seat. Intense thunder roared outside. Half of the lights in the garage were knocked out, leaving the affected area shrouded in darkness.

Cigar smoke filled the interior of the Cadillac. Halfrida caught a whiff of the smoke. "Had it been a cheap one, I'd have exited the car already." She laughed.

Nathaniel exhaled. He grounded his cigar on a steel ashtray resting on a custom-made cup-holder between the driver and front passenger seats. "Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we?" He tossed the cigar out the window.

"After you," Halfrida responded.

"Unlike your brother, I assume you and your cousins heard the rumors, yes?"

"It's imprudent of me to be ignorant," she said. "My Cousin told me everything: you guys are helping Ostara polarize the bishops while they have their Plenary Council. Are Cardinal Wolk and the USCCB aware of your activities?"

"Only Cardinal Wolk and the bishops in cahoots with His Eminence do."

"Nice of you to share."

"Right, and I prefer to keep it that way." Nathaniel slouched in his seat, his left arm resting over the headrest of the adjacent. "Let's just say that Ulrich hired Frankie and me as moles interfacing with the 'Ostara Conspiracy.'"

Francis tapped his fingers on the leather steering wheel like a nervous wreck. His eyes shifted left and right as the seconds became minutes. "Are we going to be okay talking to Halfrida, Nate?" he spoke.

Before Nathaniel could respond, Halfrida interrupted him. "Does it look like Ostara knows what you guys are doing with me?" she said. "Chill out, Frankie, there's nobody else here except us."

"Okay, but don't let this conversation drag on. Ostara is starting to suspect something." Francis made the sign of the cross and prayed in weak whispers.

Halfrida stared at the reflection of Nathaniel on the rearview mirror. A flurry of questioned swirled in her head. She blurted out the one that nagged her the most. "Why did my Cousin hire you? Is a new war, another Rosy War, in the cards? And just what on Earth is Ostara up to?"

"Your Cousin suspects that Lady Ostara, this wanted terrorist from Neudeutschland, is pursuing an agenda on behalf of someone. He doesn't know who, but he's open to any possibility he can afford." Nathaniel yawned. "Ever heard of 'Droge Acht', 'D-VIII', or 'Drug Eight'?"

"I have." Halfrida nodded. "Wolff Repository Bank, Concord Harbor."

Like a paranoid Spanish inquisitor, Nathaniel engaged in machine gun talk. "Tell me everything you know." He made quick glances at the rear windshield and the rearview mirror.

"A few months ago, Ostara sold old IG Farben documents regarding D-VIII on the black market." She stroked her chin. "The Ludwigs, a Dweller Mafia family with ties to the Independent Dweller Party, acquired it and is now manufacturing the drug. As far as I know, profits are for Independent Dweller Army."

"That's the cover story." Nathaniel pointed his finger at the reflection of her. "A red herring, what Ostara wants people like you, your twin brother, and your godparents to believe."

"How is that a cover story?" Halfrida crossed her legs.

"According to Ulrich, profits are funneled into some special superweapon projects the Conspiracy stole from the Remnants of Neudeutschland. Research came from your family's businesses in Nazi Germany, developed further during the Rosy War."

This isn't the first I'm hearing this. Her eyes narrowed. She resumed listening.

Nathaniel cleared his throat. "From what Ulrich, Frankie, and I had gathered, whoever Ostara is working for, they also run criminal enterprises. Counterfeit money, drug and arms running, fraud, graft, cyberterrorism, you name it."

Do I have someone like that in my family? Her mind drew a blank. Horst Brotzman came to mind, but she had no proof. "What did you guys find out?"

"During Rosy War, between 1997 and 2005, the Remnants worked on a number of bizarre and crazy superweapons projects." He held up the fingers on his right hand as he went. "Universal synthetic blood, telepathic communications, performance enhancers, energized body armor, biological and chemical WMDs. to name a few."

"And the rest came from my family's think-tank, the Brotzmanstab…," Halfrida muttered. "What became of these projects after the Rosy War?"

"That Peace Treaty prohibited the Remnants from pursuing any further research," Nathaniel replied. "The Remnants claimed they destroyed the projects after transitioning from National Socialism to Catholic Democracy." He leaned his body forward. "Instead, Lester von Baumgärtner, the old government's 'Plenipotentiary of War Production', outsourced them to King Percy."

"You mean the incumbent Prime Minister of Neudeutschland?" Halfrida's eyebrows shot upward.

"Yes," he answered, "And he also had some kind rivalry with Ostara in the years after Rosy War. Frankie and I believed that she took advantage of Duchess Perpetua's ambitions at first opportunity."

So the Little Red Riding Hood Cartel was bound to fail anyway. Halfrida wiped the sweat rolling down her forehead.

He cackled. "My gosh, Halfrida, don't you realize that you've been had by Ostara and Perpetua?"

"So that brings us to Lady Ostara and D-VIII?" she voiced.

"Not to mention the whereabouts for one of those projects," he added. "Somewhere in Otherworld's Eden, there's an Underground airbase where the conspirators are posing as Underground scientists and engineers while they work on experimental A-Wing."

"Is D-VIII being used to finance the projects?"

"Correct." Nathaniel nodded.

"Does it have something to do with reports of mysterious flying discs?"

"Who knows, Halfrida, that's something even I don't know."

"Is that all?" She opened the front passenger door.

"There's more: we left the location and other details in a briefcase inside the trunk. If you make it past the lax security, look for a Remnants intelligence agent being held for interrogation at the lower levels. He might have more intel." Nathaniel pulled out a cigar from his coat and turned to Francis. "We're done here, Frankie, so turn on the engine."

Francis inserted the key into the ignition and started the engine.

"Tell my Cousin I said 'Danke', Nathaniel." Halfrida stepped out of the Cadillac and jogged to the trunk. She opened it. True to his word, Nathaniel left a dark leather briefcase for her. Grabbing the case by the handle, Halfrida closed the trunk and ran back to her Mercedes.

***

(*One week later*)

THE PLAID DREAM

As the Otherworld's morning sun rose on the night of April 30th, a Studebaker truck traveled along a dirt road. With a forest green paintjob, the truck's canvas bore the Underground's emblem–a red cross within a solid white diamond. It turned left, crossing a bridge, and drove toward a paved roadway. The driver was a Conspiracy member posing as an Underground soldier, clad in khaki fatigues and polished jackboots. He pulled over next to a security checkpoint in front of Drexel Airbase's outer perimeter.

The sentries on duty wore standard-issue dark-blue Underground air force fatigues with service rifles slung over their shoulders. One of them, a man in his early twenties with shaded aviator glasses, approached the truck. Like the truck driver, he too was a conspirator.

The truck driver opened his window. "Good morning, Kovacs."

"Good morning, Kowalski."

"Got a delivery for E-10."

"Of course, but you know the drill." The sentry held out his hand.

The driver gave the sentry his ID. "Here you go."

The sentry grabbed an ID scanner strapped to his utility belt and scanned the back of the card. The scanner identified the driver by his alias. *Sergeant Stephen Kovacs, Status: KIA*, it ran. "Everything's in order, Sergeant," the sentry said, "Welcome to Drexel."

"Thanks Airman," the driver said, before driving his truck into the base.

Beyond its perimeter of barbed wire and guarded checkpoints, the facilities at Drexel Airbase remained animated and vivid. From its hangars, air traffic control towers and runways, base personnel worked around the clock. The truck drove past the facilities as it reached the center of the base. There, he drove toward a hangar with 'E-10' painted on the tall, opened steel doors.

Parking the truck in the center of the hangar, he got out and left the building. Several Underground airmen jogged into the hangar and took turns unloading crates from the truck. After lining the crates next to the parked Studebaker, one of the airmen reached for his two-way radio. "Tell the base commander that the packages have been delivered," he spoke into it.

"Copy that," a woman said on the other end.

The airmen exited the building through a door side beside the entrance.

Not long after they left, one of the crates started making noises, as if someone inside was prying their way out with a crowbar. "Come on, come on," Halfrida muffled voice blared from inside the crate closest to the truck. The crate's top popped open.

Dressed in a female Bishop Dowell uniform, with two Cz75 Tactical Sports handguns on separate shoulder holsters, she scanned the hangar. *Looks like my infiltration went without a hitch*, she thought. With a wide grin on her pretty face, she grabbed her handbag from her lap and stepped onto the hangar's cold, hard floor. *Now, let's find Hangar E-12.*

She crept up to the hangar side door and left the building. Outside, she snuck her way around a maze of wooden crates and abandoned hangars, dodging patrols of Underground sentries as she went deeper the airbase.

A few yards away from the entrance to Hangar E-12, Halfrida dove and rolled toward stack of crates. She landed with her back against the crates. A pair of sentries walked past her, chit-chatting. As they advanced further away, she observed the sentries posted at the gate. Three sentries were posted outside the gate. Past the gate itself was a machine gun mounted behind a wall of sandbags.

Halfrida cackled. *Good thing I brought my Invisibility Anomaly*. She tapped her left breast and dematerialized. Invisible to human sight, she ran past the checkpoint unnoticed and advanced to the hangar. As she closed in on the entrance, she overheard a conversation between two sentries guarding it.

"Who was that girl?" one of the two sentry asked.

"Sorry," the other sentry said, "But I don't know who you're referring to."

"I'm talking about that tall girl with flaxen hair and purple eyes," the first clarified. "She had porcelain skin and the charisma of a goddess."

"Not ringing a bell," the other sentry told him.

"That's not what I meant," he responded. "I'm talking about that girl who showed up here a few days here. I think her name was Ost…never mind..."

"Listen," the other sentry reminded him, unconcerned, "I know this job can be boring sometimes, but this conversation isn't going anywhere." Without warning, the air reeked of leaking gasoline. "Oh great," he complained, "The maintenance crews were slacking off at the fuel dump again. They must have forgotten to shut off the valves."

"Yeah, you're right," the first sentry said, upon catching a whiff. "We should hurry and shut them off before someone catches us."

"Why bother?" pondered the second. "Can't we just get the maintenance crews to do something about it?"

"Nope," the first sentry explained, "They're all slacking off at the mess hall again." He motioned his buddy to follow him. "C'mon, this won't take a while."

"Geez," the other bellyached, "If only this base had more competent security guards and technicians." He ran after the first sentry.

In the hangar, Halfrida rematerialized after sabotaging a fuel tank situated next to the structure. She giggled at her handiwork. *This is too easy*. An elevator next to the hangar side door caught her eye. She hurried to it and pushed the button on the wall panel next to it. The doors door, she went into the elevator, and rode it to the bottommost floor.

The elevator descended. Halfrida tilted her chin upward. The ceiling trapdoor was left open. She climbed onto the top of the elevator as it stopped halfway down the long concrete shaft, over two thousand feet beneath the surface.

The doors opened and two maintenance walked straight in. They let the elevator continue downward. From the darkness of the shaft, Halfrida stalked the two maintenance workers, eavesdropping them.

"I hear Kyle Raynerson, the Director of Underground Intelligence, visited the airbase with a looker," a male voice said.

"You're looking for a girlfriend?" a female voice asked, snickering.

"No, it's nothing like that," the man declined. "All I'm saying is that girl appears to be some special case of *crazy*."

"What do you mean?"

"Her uniform reflects her membership in the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, the Hitler Youth's female wing."

"But what sets her apart from the female Remnants types?"

The male voice continued, "She carried this weird amulet around her neck. At first, I mistook it as an oversized saint medallion, but it wasn't the case. She also looked like she had more notches on her Browning Hi-Power."

"So what are you trying to say?"

"I think she's a weirdo, and I'm glad she is not here anymore."

As the elevator continued its long trek down, the ride began to annoy Halfrida. *How deep does this elevator go?* She returned to the conversation.

"Still, it makes you wonder why someone like her visited Drexel," the female voice stated. "Is Central Command keeping something important down here?"

"Who knows," the male voice said. "Just be glad she's no longer here" The elevator stopped at the bottom of the shaft. The maintenance workers exited.

Halfrida landed feet first into the elevator and went invisible again. Just as the doors were closing, she pushed the button to reopen them, and scurried into a well-lit hallway.

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Far from the labyrinthine of wooden crates from earlier, the bunker's fluorescent-lit hallways were linear and followed a circular course. Everywhere, maintenance workers toiled away at the electrical circuitry on the hallway ceilings and inside the various rooms. Most of the steel doors, though locked behind keypad locks and biometric scanners, had a pair of sentries guarding them.

Metal signs on the walls directed guided through the various rooms inside the bunker. Along the way to the Interrogation Room, Halfrida avoided the numerous Underground personnel working at the bunker.

She hid behind the corner of a wall. She peeked around the corner. The corridor she came from converged onto a three-way hallway littered with security cameras going haywire. *If those signs are correct, the prisoner should be held in Interrogation Room No. 4*. She pulled out her handguns and approached the three-way hall.

The hall led to the interrogation room. She stopped in front of the two stern-faced sentries guarding the door. Unlike the other doors, the door they were guarding was closed halfway. *I'd love to rescue this guy, but I'm curious if the rumor about Ostara being here are true*. She walked away from the interrogation room. A couple doors down was the security room. She entered it.

Inside, across the room, she spotted two Underground sentries and an IT technician. The technician sat hunchbacked on a chair between the sentries,

glimpsing at several computer monitors. The monitors displayed the most recent live feed images captured on the CCTV cameras.

Squatting behind the three, Halfrida studied the grainy recordings on the screens. One screen depicted Lady Ostara pacing around a blindfolded captive before the recording cut to her waterboarding him. The next screen showed her inside a workshop with some high-ranking Underground official and his entourage. A third featured her strolling back to the elevator with a briefcase handcuffed to her wrist. The same date was displayed on the lower right-hand corner of each screen. It all went down on May 1, 2012.

Halfrida rematerialized and fire her guns at the guards' heads, the gunshots muffled by their silencers. The guards staggered and slumped to the floor in pools of their own blood.

"Who the hell are you?" the technician demanded, getting out his chair.

"I'm just a visitor." Halfrida pointed her guns at his face. "There's a workshop in here, isn't there?"

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about," he lied.

"Bad start." Eyes squinted, she shot both of his kneecaps.

The technician screamed in pain as he squirmed on the floor in a fetal position. "Jesus, Mary, I don't want to die! I'm telling you, I don't'…"

Halfrida finished him. "Geez, you're noisy!" She stood up and glanced at the images of Lady Ostara on the screen one last time. *I always knew you were two steps ahead of me, Matilde.* She turned around and walked out of the room.

Dashing toward the interrogation room, she unloaded her weapons at the two sentries and ejected her empty magazine clips. She side-stepped into the interrogation room. Inside, she giggled at what she found.

A Nordic-looking teenage boy sat nude while tied to a bloodstained chair, beaten and bloodied. Numerous bruises, cuts, and slash wounds riddled his entire body. Empty syringes were strewn on the floor near his feet. He struggled to breathe while a large bag was left wrapped over his head.

"Is…someone there?" he spoke in a German accent. "Hallo?"

"First of all, *The Plaid Dream* is a family friendly Catholic YA Satire novel." Halfrida pulled the bag from his head to cover the boy's nakedness. "We can't afford to show that part of the narrative."

"Was?" he said. "I do not understand."

"You don't have to," she told him. "Just follow the script you've been given. The chapter is almost over anyway."

"Jawohl." The boy paused. "Who are you?"

"I'm with the good guys." Halfrida winked. "Oh, and don't mind the guards: it's going to be raining Tomahawk cruise missiles real soon."

"You came to find out what I discovered?"

"Jawohl." She nodded.

"Nathaniel and Francis sent me here on orders from an 'Ulrich Brotzman'. I've been tracking down rumors about stolen technology…I checked every possibility, but nothing seems to make any sense…"

"What exactly did you find?"

"proof…proof that it could mean war with the…"

Halfrida smiled in joy at the prospect. *Wagnerian music to my ears*. "What else?" To her dismay, the spy checked out, taking his findings with him. She snapped her fingers. *Great, and I just when I thought things were about to get interesting.*

Outside the interrogation room, a man's voice echoed in the hallway. "Sound the alarms," he shouted. "We have an intruder."

Loud sirens drowned out the sound of jackboots trampling outside the interrogation room. Halfrida searched around the room for a fast escape. An air vent duct was embedded on the wall behind the dead spy. She smirked. *Perfect.*

***

(*One month later*)

"Whoa, whoa, hold on for just a second!" Harold declared from the other end of her satphone. "You recently broke into an Underground military base to steal some information and then proceeded to shoot up the place before the 'cops' arrived. And yet there was a convenient ventilation duct that you knew led to a sewer outside the base. Are you some kind of moron?"

"Dear brother, since when did I ever lie about something like that?" Halfrida spoke to her twin brother in the middle of an open field, somewhere in Iowa. Her clothes were covered in layers of dry blood, her left hand wrapped around the steel handle of a sturdy shovel. A large, shallow hole fit for two dead stiffs lay in front of her feet.

"Okay, what else happened that day?"

"Well, I did the US government a favor…for once." Dropping the shovel, she held the satphone on her other ear.

The skies above darkened as the sun faded. The Porsche 993 Turbo coupé sat idle on the roadside of a dreary country road in the distance. From the trunk of the car, Ulrich and Heinricka dragged two olive-drab body bags along the tall grass as they returned to Halfrida's side.

"You're definitely making this stuff up," Harold swore.

"Like I told you, I'm not," she insisted.

"Not sure what planet you're living on, but there's no such thing as a 'one-girl army'. You thought it sounded badass, not because you literally to function as your own private army." He sighed. "Running an army is an expensive affair, sis."

Halfrida's stomach rumbled on in the middle of a riot. She turned around and motioned her cousins to pick up the pace. *Gosh, my brother can be quite dense sometimes*. She shook her head.

Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka settled the body bags next to the hole. They unzipped the bag to reveal two corpses, the bullet-ridden remains of a blonde, blue-eyed teenage boy and girl.

Ulrich sighed. "Who in this country would give a neo-Nazi serial-killing Bonny and Clyde green cards, social security, and corporate welfare payments?" Ulrich asked Heinricka. "These two Remnants alone murdered over three hundred Americans before we came along!"

Heinricka shrugged her shoulders. "Who in this country would grant asylum to a neo-Nazi terrorist like Lady Ostara?"

"Things are different here in the US, cousins," Halfrida said. "Get used to it."

"Uh, Halfrida, …what are you doing over there?" Harold bellowed.

"Listen, I'll catch you later." She smiled. "Right now, I'm burying 'bodies' and heading on down to this nice Turkish restaurant once I'm done."

"What is this, a German Mafia flick?"

"Even worse: 'a novel full of realities.'"

Chapter Ten: Let's Start A War!
(Ryanite Chorus; May 4th-June 10th, 2012)

"Before us stands GACSS, within us lies GACSS, and behind us follows GACSS! American Catholic Education is on the march, rising out of its own ashes of corruption and decadence!"

-Harold Brotzman

The gas lantern mounted on the ceiling of Ulrich's shack flickered. Halfrida had just returned to her cousins after chasing the lead that Cousin Ulrich had learned from Francis and Nathaniel. Ulrich and she paced back and forth around the bedroom, the two cousins refusing to make eye contact.

Cousin Heinricka sat crisscrossed on Ulrich's bed, eyes glued to her laptop, shivering by what she had discovered. Someone created websites with domain names like 'catholicschoolshooting628.com', 'columbineinpennslyvania.com', 'horrorinphiladelphia.com', and 'reichstagfire2012.com'. She closed her laptop and turned to her other cousins.

"I'm telling you, Cousin," she told Ulrich, "Lady Ostara is up to something. This Conspiracy of hers is worth probing further into."

"Sounds great," Ulrich said, "But Heinricka and I are still on the run."

"I know that," Halfrida retorted.

"Just let me finish!" he raised his voice. "I am an illegal immigrant in this country, and my Opa Horst is now looking for me. At the same time, Interpol is tightening the noose around our Cousin Heinricka." He gestured at Heinricka.

"What am I supposed to do then?" Halfrida shrugged her shoulders.

"Can't you help us out for once?" he shouted. "You cannot spend the rest of your life helping your twin brother all the time. Everything doesn't revolve around Harold." He poked at her chest. "Are you listening?"

Halfrida pulled his finger away from her chest. "Fine, if you insist…" Crossing her arms, she paced back and forth around her cousin's shack. She stopped between Ulrich and Heinricka, stroking her chin, the grin on her face widening. "Yes, yes, yes," she murmured to herself.

"What is she thinking about this time?" Heinricka spoke to Ulrich.

"I don't know." He shook his head. "Perhaps she'll enlighten us soon."

"That's it!" Halfrida held up a clenched fist in the air. "I think I got it."

"You do?" Heinricka pondered. "What is it then?"

Halfrida pounded the clenched fist against the palm of her hand. "Cousins, did I ever mention that I have a boyfriend, who's actually my pen-pal of sorts?"

Ulrich's mind drew a blank. *This is the first time I'm hearing of this.* "Not to my knowledge," he said.

Heinricka shook her head. "You didn't. What's his name?"

"Chandler Daniel Martinsen," Halfrida answered. "He's a good friend of Marcus McAlister…"

"That elusive spy we met back at Concord Harbor?" Ulrich recalled.

"Yeah, him and Chandler go way back," Halfrida told him. "They both attend St. Maria Goretti. Some Catholic high school in this small city in Iowa called Davenport. Among Jackbooters like Lance Jansen, it's a backwater trade route, so I doubt anyone will be looking for you two there."

Ulrich leaned on the wall beside his bed. "Are you sure about that?"

Halfrida nodded. "I'm positive."

"Okay, then tell us: what's your plan?"

Eyes darting across the shack, Halfrida looked for potential signs of eavesdroppers or hidden wiretapping devices. "Listen, I know this neo-Nazi Bonnie and Clyde duo hiding somewhere in Iowa. While their war crimes are unknown to FBI and ICE, I happen to know where they're hiding."

"How did you find that out?" Ulrich cocked his head to the side.

"Oh, some bits and pieces of intelligence gathered from Anthony, Marcus, Drusilla, Lance, Francis, and Nathaniel," Halfrida explained. "I had to run a couple errands for all six to uncover this Bonnie and Clyde's hideout."

Heinricka blurted, "What do you know about them, Halfrida?"

From what I know, they're Remnants, so that means they're wanted in *Neudeutschland*." Halfrida stared into Ulrich's eyes. "You're going to like them."

"Why would I 'like' a pair of criminals?" he objected.

"Nobody in America is looking for them," she clarified. "Remnants don't register for this country's census, and their police forces aren't supposed to be in this country. I doubt anyone will be asking too many questions."

Halfrida giggled. "All we need to do is kill the duo and bury the corpses. Hopefully, if Howard Wolff wins the election later this year, you'll both be able to live the American Dream just as Ronald Reagan had promised us."

"And…what's that?" Heinricka pondered.

"Buying T-bone steaks and Cadillacs at taxpayers' expense and paying fewer taxes than the tinfoil-hat schoolgirl who gets paid licking my brother's jackboots every night." Halfrida giggled at the thought. "You know, 'corporate welfare.'"

"Seriously, can't you find any better identities for us?" Ulrich sighed.

"It's not like we had a choice in the matter, Ulrich," Heinricka chimed.

"Who's to say that we had one to begin with?" He stared at Heinricka.

Cheeks reddening, Heinricka stared at the floor. "Never mind," she muttered.

Ulrich returned to Halfrida. "When are we leaving?"

"When you two are ready," Halfrida said. "My Porsche is fueled up and ready to go. And for your conveniences, I've left two Teleportation Transponders in the trunk, Teleport Anomalies programmed to separate locations in Otherworld."

"Now that you mentioned Lance…" He stroked his chin. "I've never been to Iowa before." He smirked. "This'll be interesting."

"Amen," Heinricka blurted, clasping her hands in a prayerful motion.

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(*Twenty-four days later*)

School bells wailed like Valkyries at high noon. Nine hundred students flooded the halls, filling the air with noisy chatter. While some removed their

belongings from school lockers, others headed home. The first day of final exams at St. Maria Goretti Catholic High School had just ended.

Turmoil and terror brewed on the third floor, in the hall of lockers reserved for its eleventh graders. Hundreds fled the building, as if a falling $150,000 MOAB had exploded over the school building, vaporizing and incinerating everything within a thousand yards in a gigantic oxygen-enriched cloud of fire.

Chandler, a six foot tall brownshirt with dirty-blonde hair, cold steel eyes, and lean muscles, goose-stepped through the long hall. Like the other boys, his uniform was a royal blue sweater, white dress shirt with blue and white necktie, khaki pants. The school insignia on his left breast bore the name 'St. Maria Goretti' in silver blackletter.

He wrapped his right hand over the silvery belt buckle of his black Sam Browne belt as he romped. The steel hobnails on the leather soles of his spit-shined jackboots cracked the tiled floors.

Everyone, students and teachers alike, steered clear of Chandler's path, his explosive temper as frightening as his penchant for extreme violence. Hushed whispers flurried behind his back. A few students even took notes and photos of him on their smartphones.

Chandler pressed his palm against his forehead. *People are talking about me again.*

Two students towards the end of the hall spotted him. They stood next to the open doorway of a classroom. "Is he the one who almost killed that other guy back in freshman year?" one student asked.

The other nodded. "Yeah, what was that all about?"

"This guy made fun of Chandler for wanting to be a priest. Chandler beat the crap out of him and said 'people who insult my faith should get the bullet.'"

"And the principal allowed him to stay?"

Chandler tilted his head at them, staring at them with a stern face.

The students quavered and trembled. They fled into the classroom.

He shook his head and continued down the hall. *Serves them right.*

Towards the end of the hall, Chandler spotted a newsstand near a corkboard. German *Fraktur* typography above newspaper pinned to the corkboard caught his attention. *Ryanite Weekly Review*, it read in big black letters.

I should check this out first. He approached the newsstand. On the corkboard was a wildly popular excerpt of most Halfrida's recent speech.

Catholic Identity is under attack! Our schools must expel the hundreds of thousands of heretics, schismatics, apostates, and non-Catholic students and teachers. Fire everyone who disagrees with Church teachings! These terrorists blow themselves up in our parishes, infiltrate our dioceses, assassinate our bishops, and rape the nuns and sisters! It's all a plot to bastardize our faith, mongrelize our minds, and corrupt our youthfulness! They want to exterminate the Catholic Church from the face of the Earth!

As for Catholic homeschoolers like Duchess Perpetua, they too are also out to destroy Ryanites like you and me! These empty-headed fools are a scourge on our Church! The most effective way to cure ourselves of these inbreeds is a bullet! Almighty God, bless my rifle and weapons of war. With them, I shall destroy all who oppose and blaspheme Your Will.

Chandler nodded his head. "I agree with you 100%, Halfrida." He cracked a smile and walked away.

Opening his locker, Chandler dumped some of his textbooks into his backpack and slammed the door shut with a kick from his spit-shined jackboots.

Marcus McAlister leaned on the locker next to his, smiling.

Chandler grinned at him. "How's life, Marcus?"

"I just wanted to chat with a childhood friend from my parish."

"Listen man, I don't want to get myself in more trouble after freshman year."

McAlister was the gambling type, always pushing the envelope, always looking for ways to test his luck. Talking to Chandler for the first time in years was his biggest gamble yet. "Come now, that boy who insulted your discernment to the priesthood deserved being in a coma. Look, we're both Traditional Catholics, good old *Kameraden* (Comrades) in the Faith."

He pointed at Chandler and himself. "We're both after the same thing: Christ-centered Catholic schools for Christ-centered youth who're angry at the world. Want to hear me out?"

"Sure." Chandler put aside his rage. "What's up?"

"You've been a real news item since freshman year," McAlister smiled. "It's almost a ridiculous miracle, how our principal hasn't expelled you yet. Or how the judge and jury were 'convinced' that sending you to juvie was a bad move."

"Life is full of coincidences," Chandler told him. "There's nothing sweeter in my life than fulfilling God's plan for me." His skin stiffened. *I sure hope he doesn't know that my pen-pal, my beloved Halfrida, was the one who cleared my name.*

McAlister snickered. "Were your days in criminal court a part of His Plan?"

He rolled his eyes. "Sure, why not?"

"Come on, spill the beans! Halfrida's your secret to staying alive and free!"

Does he have a death wish or something? Freshman year opened Chandler's mind to violent solutions to life's problems. "Marcus, do you really want to know?" He rolled up his sleeves.

"We're still childhood friends, aren't we, aren't we?" Marcus passed the buck. "Hear me out for once before you clobber me to death, Mr. Brownshirt."

Chandler scratched the back of his head. "I'm listening."

"Your eagerness to commit violence in the name of God can be used for good." Marcus smirked. "I know some people who are in need of your services."

"Why?" Chandler crossed his arms. What's it to you?"

"Don't you ever pay attention to the good news by our beloved Fake News?"

He shook his head. "What's going on in the world today?"

"American Catholic Education is literally Weimar Germany," Marcus ranted. "For decades, our Catholic school system has faced closures, rising tuition, weakening Catholic Identity, stuff like that. We got more vice in our schools to make Weimar Berlin, the biggest brothel of sex freaks on Earth, jealous."

Marcus rambled on. "We're paying reparations to the Catholic School Underground, these Pharisee-like Catholic homeschoolers. These heretics and schismatics have taken to the halls en masse and all the bishops in USCCB are

powerless to stop them." He pounded his chest. "I swear, man, Catholic America is creamed if they're struggling to educate their youth!"

Chandler laughed. "Are you saying we need to bring back Nazi Germany? Or-or drop down on our knees and stare at the sky, wailing '*Mein Führer*, please come back, humanity needs you again!'" He laughed even harder.

"No, that's anti-Ryanite propaganda, a conspiracy theory," Marcus told him. "Don't ever drink the anti-Ryanite Kool-Aid our enemies brew for us Catholics."

Damn, I shouldn't have said that. Chandler sighed. "So let me guess…" He stretched his arms. "…you're one of those young Catholics who listen to Harold and Halfrida Brotzman and insist that we must take our country back in time?"

Marcus nodded. "We need to go back to a time when Americans viewed Catholic as hostile and alien. You know what you mean, don't you, don't you?"

The two boys blurted: "Philadelphia Bible Riots."

"Yeah, I don't see anything wrong with seeing buildings set on fire and militias shooting each other in the streets every Saturday night." Chandler laughed. "It's gets pretty boring in this country of ours these days."

"That's we must make American Catholic Education 'Catholic' again!" Marcus stressed. "Purge the heretics, expel all the non-Catholics from our schools, and shoot the homeschooling imperialist dogs! It's time to refight World War II under a brand new name like the 'Global War on Terror!'"

Time to get laid, slam it like a missile to the right place, Chandler pondered. The cogs and gears inside his brain kicked themselves into high gear. Sex before marriage was taboo to both him and Halfrida. The closest equivalent was sharing a Raytheon BGM-71 TOW and shoving its $60,000 taxpayer-funded missile up a hapless MAFV's rear at point-blank.

"Hey, do you think Halfrida will enjoy you dropping a 14,000 kilogram MOP (Massive Ordnance Penetrator) on her honeymoon?" Marcus asked. "Boeing said it'll cost her $3,000,000 just to manufacture one."

"Anything is possible with God if you got lots of guns and money, Marcus."

"Who else besides Him can explain why you didn't go to juvie?" Marcus chuckled. "Was Halfrida keeping you out of trouble this whole time?"

"You're not going to let that go, huh?" Chandler frowned.

Marcus shook his head.

"To be honest, it's complicated, messy." Chandler scratched his scalp again. "Freshman year was hell for me." A pent-up rage boiled the blood coursing through his veins. "The juniors and seniors back then were animals who'd desecrate the Catholic faith whenever they got a chance!" He punched his locker door, ignoring the painful sensation in his knuckles.

Marcus froze, frightened by the anger seething out of his childhood friend.

Chandler took a few deep breaths and exhaled. "I'm sorry I had to act this way. I will never forget the freak show that was freshman year."

"Amen to that." Marcus grinned. "But you must understand that times are changing." Clenching his hands, he placed them over his pelvis. "We're on the cusp of changing the state of Catholic Education in this country. If the bishops

allow the Brotzman twins to create and run the so-called 'Republic Program', we could reverse the past fifty years of decline."

"Sounds pretty optimistic," Chandler voiced.

"Is it?" Marcus raised an eyebrow. "On the contrary, I disagree. To me, it's only a matter of time before it becomes a real possibility."

Not sure what he's smoking, because I remain unconvinced. Chandler leaned his back on his locker door. *I should hear him out for once.* "So what does she suggest?"

The boys responded: "Let's start a war!"

The thought of his beloved Halfrida stoked his desires to impress her, earn her love by helping her or her brother in some way. Chandler smirked, eager to play along. "Maybe you're right: we *are* after the same thing."

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(*Four days later*)

Chandler's parents left the house, looking the other way as their only son entertained the two guests at the family breakfast table. From an island table beside the stove, Chandler carried plates of medium rare T-bone steaks, three-cheese omelets, and hash brown fillets to the breakfast table. Settling the tray in the middle of the table, he gave a plate to the two cousins and two more for himself. The cousins waited for him to be seated.

"You have the honors, Chandler," Ulrich told him.

"Okay." Chandler made the sign of the cross. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." Elbows planted between his plates, he clasped his hands in prayer. Both cousins did the same. "Bless us, oh Lord, and these thy gifts from which we are about to receive, from thy bounty. Amen."

He made the sign of the cross again. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

With a wide smile on his face, he glanced at the cousins. "Alright, you two, make sure to savor the flavor, and don't forget your table manners." Chandler picked up his fork and K-bar fighting knife and hacked off a slice of beef from the T-bone. Thrusting the sharp tip of the K-bar's blade into the beef, he crammed the meat into his mouth.

"So where'd you learn how to cook, Chandler?" Ulrich asked.

"A couple months back," he mumbled before swallowing. "Somebody's got to feed the other stormtroopers after a long, hard day of gunning down terrorists. As long as I don't use gunpowder as a preservative, all is well."

Ulrich twisted the cap off of the Martinsen family's secret steak sauce and poured a small teaspoon over his T-bone steak. He cut a slice and chewed it in his mouth. The steak sauce tasted like Bourbon whiskey mixed with honey and Red Bull. His eyes tilted rightward, towards Heinricka.

Heinricka sweated like an impaled pig roasting over an open fire. "Does the sauce taste good?" she whispered into his ear.

"As soon as you get used to the taste." Ulrich passed the glass bottle.

"Nein." Heinricka shook her head. "I think I'll pass…" She set the bottle down on the table.

THE PLAID DREAM

The sun's rosy fingers crept through the gaps between the window blinds behind the breakfast table. Birds chirped outside. RGA St. Francis of Assisi Fr101F-1 Fighter A-Wings practiced aerial maneuvers over the house, their loud propeller engines ripping through the hot, sticky air outside. Seven St. Gandolph Ga205 dive bombers wailed their deafening, disorienting sirens like the Seven Trumpets from the Book of Revelation.

Chandler chuckled. "Ah, every new day should begin with load sirens." He cracked a smile. "Watch out for the bombs and pray to God that it's just a dud."

"Lots of Ryanites want to seize living space in the Otherworld," Heinricka mused. From her lap, she showed Chandler her June 2012 copy of *Catholic School Observer*. "See? More and more people now want to refight the Rosy War!"

"No need to show me, Heinricka." Chandler held up the palm of his hand whilst chewing his food. "Your Cousin Halfrida drafted me into the RGA." He swallowed the food whole and downed a martini glass of orange juice. "It was about damn time we had another war. The Peace Treaty that ended the Rosy War was a one-sided deal that benefited the Underground."

"Ja, but can we win?"

"Who says we won't?" Chandler sliced another piece from the other T-bone steak. "As long as God is on our side, anything's possible, so please take that with you when you finally meet Jesus at the Bank of Interdimensional Settlements (BIS)." He nested the beef on his tongue and chewed it.

"Wait, what?" Ulrich blared.

"You heard me, Ulrich!" Chandler pointed his index finger at the ceiling, smiling. "Everyone will receive that special audit from the Lord at the BIS when they die. The choices you made in this life determine your overall holiness rating."

He wagged his finger left and right, waving a Geiger counter in a dance party at the Fukushima reactor. "If you keep living in sin all day, every day, Jesus will command the angels to throw you out of a free helicopter ride to Hell!"

Chandler rambled on, confusing the cousins even further. "So if you've been collecting your penances from the parish priest, then you might just end up at some crummy Third World flophouse in Purgatory. But if you got a great, great holiness rating and collecting your prayer loans at zero percent interest rates, you'll be able secure some fine real estate upstairs in Heaven."

"I suppose…," Heinricka voiced. "Well, Jesus did say that His Father's Heavenly Reich has many smaller Reichs."

"As Mother Angelica once said on EWTN: 'Absolutely!'" Chandler snapped his fingers. "Once you do secure some of that real estate, you'll be stepping into a ThyssenKrupp elevator, where you'll soon be meeting Ss. Peter and Michael the Archangel at the Berlin Wall in no time."

Something clicked inside Ulrich's brain. It turned out there really was some logic to Chandler's deranged breakfast talk. He stroked his chin, blurting his thoughts aloud. "Let me guess: did Harold and Halfrida make a lucrative deal with the Lord at their Baptism?"

"I guess you could say that," Chandler said.

"Then if that's case, going by your logic, a Ryanite victory in Brotzmanskrieg should be seen as a sign that they played along with God's Plan." Ulrich laughed at thought of the twins being audited by Jesus Christ at the Swiss *Bank of International Settlements* (BIS). "I mean, seeing how Cousins Harold and Halfrida's baptismal certificates are 'counterfeit' and 'legit', I won't be surprised if that's the truth."

Snapping his fingers on both hands, Chandler pointed them at Ulrich. "Amen to that." The breakfast table was doused in full austerity. "Speaking of which, after breakfast, should we all go to St. Maria Goretti and enroll for next year?"

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(Eight days later)

2011 saw all the chess pieces deployed on the Grand Chessboard. June 9, 2012 witnessed Cardinal Wolk and the US Catholic bishops creating the Republic Program. As the final pieces placed on the Grand Chessboard, the bishops' fountain pens heralded GACSS.

Meanwhile, Howard 'the Barbarian' Wolff became the Republican presidential candidate for the 2012 elections. The Catholic bishops also received a special request to annul a certain marriage of convenience. The explanation for both came as an explosive newsreel of *Peace Through Strength!*

The newsreel depicted icy wastes of Antarctica as a place no different than Chile or Argentina. "It's got awesome, like, nude beaches, spectacular cities, temperate year-round climates, a German-looking, like, military, and a majority Catholic population," Fake News narrated over the scenes.

It cut to a five-star luxurious cave in 'Afghanistan', which was code for Antarctica. Fake News herself, sitting cross-legged on a chair with a notepad and pen. In front of her sat the girls, dressed in their Sunday best clothes. She faced each girl and addressed them in a courteous voice.

"Speak now, little lamb," Perpetua yawned.

"Halfrida, Your Highness, and Fräulein von Brandt," she said, eyes glued to the pad, "It seems like Jesus Christ was smiling on all three of you."

"Amen," Halfrida and the other girls replied, nodding their heads.

"The GOP anointed your yes-man as their presidential candidate against the incumbent Democratic President," Fake News continued. "At the same time, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops ordered the formation of the 'Republic Program.' From what I can tell…"

She tilted her chin down and glanced at her notes. "…All of you wish to make America great again according to your own designs." Fake News stared at them. "What is your ideal vision of American governance?"

"A Catholic Totalitarian Democracy," Halfrida answered, crossing her legs.

"A Catholic Absolute Monarchy where my uncle and His Greatness, Emperor Bernard, wields authority higher than the President," Perpetua replied.

"A Catholic Aryan Fascist state," Ostara cackled. "Race was and still continues to be the biggest American issue right now."

Fake News jotted down their responses. "Why would the average American voter want to vote for your yes-man as the next President?"

The three girls turned their words into bullets. They spent the next few seconds cocking and loading their mouths.

Halfrida drew the first shot. "America is in serious trouble right now," she told Fake News. "The government owes trillions to the Saudis, Chinese, Japanese, and, since the 2008 bailouts, me and my brother."

"Wait, the government owes people money?" Fake News scratched her scalp.

"America borrows a $1,000,000 every sixty seconds," Halfrida explained. "The US won't even make it to next month without people like me! Why do you think Democrats and Republicans now want to pass a special law for my family to not pay a single penny in taxes for all eternity?"

She sighed. "Most Americans love to talk, talk, talk." She whipped out her Cz75 Tactical Sports from her handbag. "But I like go…" She fired three times.

"How much money does the Brotzman family have?" Fake News mused.

"Over $300,000,000,000,000!" Halfrida answered, before sipping on a bottle of water. "The country has billions of heavily-armed immigrants pouring through its borders with machine guns, tanks, and planes! We have incompetent leaders in Washington, and a failing economy! Their vote is now more important than ever!"

She drank more water. "My brother and I want to build stronger, prouder, and freer America! I think it's time for Americans to drain the swamp and take their country back in time before 2008!"

"Liberal Democracy is not the 'end of history,' as Francis Fukuyama wanted us all to believe," Perpetua lamented. "The 9/11 attacks made sure of that. Most Americans right now need strong leaders, leaders that whole generations can trust and guide policymakers. I think it's time for Americans to drain the swamp and take their country back in time before 1776!"

"The country's problems can evaporate overnight if we come to our senses and understand that race dictates everything," Ostara said. "Hard-working Aryan Americans are being oppressed by non-Aryans and their government. They're expressing their anger through acts of terrorism. I think it's time for Americans to drain the swamp and take their country back in time before 1945!"

"What are your views on the economy?" Fake News asked the girls.

"The government has gone way too fat and obese!" Halfrida blurted. "Wall Street and big businesses exert more power over Congress than the American people! True democracies are neither Capitalist nor Socialist, they are Distributist. State rights should be valued over federal ones. Congress should enact policies creating a fair climate for both big and small businesses. Pass policies that oppose mergers, takeovers, monopolies, and the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs."

Perpetua clapped her hands. "Well said."

Halfrida, eying Perpetua, folded her arms. "It's your turn, Your Highness."

"Of course," Perpetua responded. She straightened her posture. "As for me, well, I think the jury is still out on that one. You see, my economic beliefs are the same as Halfrida's." She turned to Ostara. "Go ahead," she whispered.

"To quote a Waffen-ϟϟ General and Catholic extremist, 'enrichment follows investment,'" Ostara said. "The market alone can't bring people out of recessions

or depressions. Instead, you let government stimulate the economy with defense spending and tax cuts to restore economic growth. Invade a few countries, maybe provoke Putin and the Kremlin. It worked with Adolf Hitler and Ronald Reagan, so a nuclear war with Russia is a good thing."

She continued. "Every American, from high schoolers to the unemployed, should be pressured into finding a job. If they can't find one, the IRS will instead throw the suckers into cattle cars to government labor camps."

Halfrida gasped. "You mean like Auschwitz, Dachau, or Buchenwald?" She shuddered and trembled in fear.

"*Nein*!" Ostara shouted with her fists clenched. "Think of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal or Dwight Eisenhower's American *Autobahn*, Halfrida. I'm talking public works projects that provide meaningful work for all."

"How would a Wolff Presidency guide American foreign policy?"

"America needs to invade Poland," Ostara answered. "Poland, Stalin and Churchill's perverted lovechild, is pumping out mass school shooters who can't get it through their skulls that Pope Benedict XVI is not the freaking Antichrist!"

"Forget about body count, America!" Perpetua ranted. "Catholic Education is more important than moping about a bunch of dead useless yokels!"

From her holster, Ostara whipped out her Browning Hi-Power handgun. "You know, this is the same gun used to shoot Pope John Paul II. Even as far back as 1981, whoever shot King Percy from the sixth floor of the schoolbook depository also speaks German and hates Poland!"

She holstered her Browning, her tone shifting into an alarmed, hysterical tone. "Just the other day, the leader of Poland warned Israel that they're going to start a new Holocaust. I'm pretty certain that the killer wants to put a freaking bullet into that lovechild's head!"

"The Polish government is a racist theocracy that preaches a violent, heretical version of Catholicism." Halfrida stroked her chin, eyes narrowed. "Not long ago, the three of us found evidence that the Poles were developing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons – like, OMG, 'Weapons of Mass Destruction!'"

"And unlike Saddam's Iraq, we found more than just Nigerian yellowcake and Aluminum tubes!" Ostara cheered.

"We learned about it from my intelligence sources," Perpetua added. "And they're always right, in case you're wondering."

"I see," Fake News muttered. "What about the rest of the world?"

"Wait and see," the girls responded, arms crossed, eyes glaring at each other.

The recording came to a halt. "I never got the answer to that question," Fake News admitted in a voiceover narration.

Part Two: Halfrida, Cousin Ulrich, und Der Ritter

(Halfrida, Cousin Ulrich and the Knight)

Chapter Eleven: Machtpolitik
(Ryanite Chorus; June 28th-July 17th, 2012)

"Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed."

-Chairman Mao Zedong

Machtpolitik–the 'Politics of Power', governed the mindset of Halfrida, Duchess Perpetua, and Lady Ostara. As war over control the Anomaly trade drew ever so closer, they signaled their intentions to all the leaders and nations of the Earth. Fake News made that certain in the June 28 edition of *Peace Through Strength!*.

Everything about the newsreel for that day was wrong. The audio, along with Fake News' voice, was distorted and almost rendered incoherent. Entire chunks of footage had been omitted or else doctored. Only two large sections of footage were left intact, as if somebody wanted to draw viewers' attention to them.

"June 15. Neo-Nazi terrorists disguised as RGA commandos bombed the Catholic School Underground's naval port in Other-Boston, Eden." The newsreel showed shots of collapsed buildings, burning warships, and several destroyed A-Wings at a cratered airfield nearby. Dead Underground sailors and marines piled high like firewood, with some bodies missing either a limb or a head.

Fake News narrated over an official address to the Underground kingdom. Emperor Bernard Raynerson, dressed in royal regalia, presided behind a podium in front of the steps of Other-Boston's city hall building. Duchess Perpetua stood beside her uncle, smiling. "Duchess Perpetua convinced her uncle, Emperor Raynerson to approve the Catholic School Underground's declaration of war on the Greater American Catholic School System (GACSS)."

The newsreel cut to a scene of Harold Brotzman delivering a speech to Ryanite and Remnants journalists at a press conference. Halfrida Brotzman stood beside 'him'. Unbeknownst to everyone, Halfrida was crossdressing as her brother while delivering that speech.

"June 21," Fake News spoke. "State Chancellor Harold Brotzman approved RGA High Command's decision to launch a joint Ryanite-Remnant invasion of Other-Atlantic City." Her voice faded, replaced by Halfrida's voice.

Halfrida spoke in her best Harold Brotzman impression. "Since the Underground has refused to cede the land to us, our only choice is military action. This is not open to debate or discussion." Halfrida gazed at the people standing behind the camera. "End of story."

War footage of RGA troops battling Underground in the Otherworld followed. Landing craft sailed to the coastline of a beachhead on a cloudy morning. Artillery shells lobbed from fortified bunkers behind the coast. One shell slammed into one of the landing craft, destroying it and killing everyone onboard. Dismembered bodies, weapons, and broken pieces of metal floated in the water.

"After days of bloody fighting," Fake News said. "RGA naval infantry and MAFVs seized the hotels and resorts in Other-Atlantic City, Eden. Air attacks

from Ryanite A-Wing bombers and attackers rained destruction on a major highway connecting the city and Other-Philadelphia."

Ryanite A-Wings soared in the skies above Other-New Jersey. Fighters engaged Underground bombers flying to Other-Atlantic City. Ground attack planes tossed bombs over columns of Underground MAFVs, trucks, halftracks, and armored personnel carriers commuting down a highway road.

Hundreds of bombs, big and small, exploded on impact. Ryanite attacker planes strafed enemy ground troops with laser machine guns and plasma cannon fire. Troop trucks crashed into one another, others swerved away from the road and fell into an adjacent ditch, crushing several Underground soldiers beneath their chassis. Other Underground troops ran toward a nearby forest, away from the highway road, taking potshots at the Ryanite A-Wings.

"With Underground MAFVs knocked out, the road to Other-Philadelphia was open by the evening of 21st June," Fake News continued over footage of RGA MAFVs and halftracks cruising past the carnage on the other opposite road. Victorious Ryanite soldiers riding atop columns of MAFVs stared at their fallen enemy, others posing for selfies with their smartphones.

"Later that day, RGA *Fallschirmjäger* launched an audacious air assault into Other-Philadelphia." Footage filmed in a tinted green glow showed Ryanite paratroopers jumping out of a C-130 Hercules transport plane amidst dark plumes of Underground anti-aircraft fire.

The newsreel later cut to that same camera showing more C-130s dropping paratroopers above the city of Other-Philadelphia. Parachutes blossomed hundreds of feet in the air, as Ryanite paratroopers landed on the ground. One of the enemy's FlaK cannon shells ripped a C-130 in half. The C-130 plummeted out of the sky and crashed in the distance.

"Troops from the 1st and 4th RGA Panzer Brigades linked up with the victorious paratroopers this morning." Surviving paratroopers, smiling in relief, emerged out of bombed-out building in downtown Other-Philadelphia. They walked through the front entrance to greet a group of RGA generals with their entourage on the sidewalk.

The generals and the paratroopers shook each other's hands, grateful that they were alive. A column of Ryanite MAFVs cruised past them on the road in front of the building. "With Other-Philadelphia secured," Fake News said. "RGA High Command is confident in their mission to secure Republic territory in the Otherworld from Underground forces."

"June 28…" Fake News' voice faded as the newsreel came to an abrupt end.

"…*Wir sind zurück* (We're back)," a German boy's voice warned.

An ominous clip, filmed in black and white, was edited into the newsreel by someone. A music box melody of the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* blared in the background. The clip was filmed inside one of the classroom at Neumann-Seton. The American flag, mounted on a wall for the Pledge of Allegiance on the morning of every school day, had been replaced with the flag of Nazi Germany.

In front of the classroom, Lady Ostara scribbled something on the classroom marker board. She was clad in the uniform of the BDM (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*; 'Band of German Maidens'). Brown jacket over white blouse and black neckerchief, dark-blue knee-length skirt and polished black jackboots, her knee-length platinum blonde tresses braided.

The camera panned toward the board for a close up of the message. Written in German-style *Sütterlinschrift*, it read: *Mein Führer, bitte kommt wieder! Amerika braucht dich!* (Hitler, please come back! America needs you!)

Ostara turned around to face the camera with a wolfish grin. Cackling like a wicked witch, she clicked the back of her heels and raised her right arm above her shoulders. The *Ostara-Verschwörung* ('Ostara Conspiracy'), that ϟϟ Colonel and most of his family, and the *Führer* himself declared war on GACSS, the Underground. A new Pearl Harbor awaited all of America. World War II never ended.

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The sun ascended in the skies over America on June 28. Humid air lingered in the sweltering summer heat. Schools, both Catholic and non-Catholic, had been on vacation for the past few weeks. At Chandler's house, Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka enjoyed a meal together at the breakfast table. Chandler was still in the Otherworld as an RGA soldier, gunning down fanatical homeschoolers.

Ulrich's satphone rang. Sitting at the breakfast table with Heinricka, he reached into his pocket and answered it. "Hallo?" he spoke into it.

"Hey, it's me," Halfrida said. "Today feels perfect for a new Reichstag Fire, a Columbine-style Reichstag Fire."

"What are you babbling about?"

"It's just as I had predicted over a year ago."

"Don't tell me you're talking about another conspiracy theory Margaret concocted." Ulrich sighed. "I have no time for her conspiracy theories, Cousin."

"I'm legally sane, you know!" Halfrida shouted over the sounds of gunfire in the background.

The ringing in Ulrich's ears was the sound of the Ostara Conspiracy declaring war on GACSS and Underground. "What the hell's going on over there?"

"Dammit, just turn on the TV!" she screamed, shooting her Cz75 Tactical Sports several times before hanging up.

Heinricka stared at him with her head cocked to the side. "Cousin, is something wrong?" Without a word, he set the satphone aside on the table and hurried to the living room. Heinricka went after him.

In the living room, Ulrich picked up a TV remote resting on a table in front of a couch. He pointed it at a flat screen TV set mounted on a wall ahead and pushed the power button. The TV flickered to life.

"If you're joining us from the West Coast right now, a Boeing 767 passenger plane has crashed into a building in downtown Philadelphia," a male voice announced through the speakers. "Earlier this morning, unknown terrorists had hijacked Delta Airlines Flight 1488."

1488…isn't '1488' that White Nationalist slogan? Ulrich's eyes narrowed.

A talking head on Fox News was reporting on an alleged 'terrorist attack' in Philadelphia. Onscreen, black smoke plumed out of a few windows and a small gaping hole at the point of impact. A small fire spread across the affected floor as Catholic priests, nuns, and laymen inside the building hurried to put out the fire. Fire extinguishers put out the flames without any trouble.

Slow motion playback footage showed a 'passenger plane' speeding toward the building at Mach 2, plowing through the window and exploding. It was a St. Blaise Bl321F, a Ryanite naval bomber based on the German Focke-Wulf Fw-200C-3, which was a naval bomber converted from a passenger plane.

"*Oh Mein Gott*!" Heinricka shrieked in terror whilst watching the replay. She made the sign of the cross, dropped to her knees, and started praying next to Ulrich. "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to Heaven, especially those in most need of Your Mercy…"

Ulrich scoffed at the TV. *Why is this idiot calling that thing a Boeing 767?* "That wasn't a Boeing, Cousin!" Ulrich stared at her.

"Even so, Cardinal Wolk was inside his office!" Heinricka pointed at the TV. "The plane struck the offices of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia!"

"Nein, His Eminence is with Cousin Harold at the Vatican, meeting the Holy Father," he corrected her. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh, ja, that's right…" Heinricka made the sign of the cross again and got back on her feet again. "Change the channel!"

Ulrich muted the TV and changed the channel to CNN. Onscreen was footage of dark-gray flying discs battling a US carrier battlegroup and squadrons of F/A-18s off the coast of Florida. Terrorists sent a U-boat wolfpack and squadrons of flying discs after the *USS Franklin D. Roosevelt* and its escort warships.

The flying discs peppered the F/A-18s with a barrage of laser machine gun fire. The US Navy fighters weaved through hot red beams as they played cat and mouse with the flying discs. Locking onto their targets, the American warplanes launched their air-to-air missiles at the discs.

A missile landed a direct hit one of the discs. Smoke and sparks flew out of the fuselage, yet the disc remained airworthy. One of the flying discs engaged the F/A-18s by dropping canisters out of their undercarriages.

The canisters released a colorless, odorless solution that engulfed the air around it. The F/A-18s' afterburners reacted with the solution. A huge explosion consumed the jets, sparing the flying discs as they flew out of the inferno. Even the damaged one got out, black smoke trailing behind its damaged fuselage.

The discs harassed the battlegroup with their disorienting Jericho Trumpets. Unguided bombs tossed from undercarriages landed in the waters around the aircraft carrier, the explosions rocking it left and right. A dozen or so sailors and a few F/A-18s on the flight deck were thrown overboard.

Air defenses aboard the *Franklin D. Roosevelt* returned fire. PHALANX Gatling guns screamed. SAM batteries hurled their short-range Sea Sparrows and infrared-homing Rolling Airframe Missiles. Mk38 autocannons and .50 Cal machine guns roared.

Several flying discs shot down. The survivors broke away from their attack formations to evade incoming SAM missiles. They continued to harass the aircraft carrier. Meanwhile, terrorist U-boat wolfpacks stalked the battlegroup from beneath the waves, positioning themselves for an attack.

A proton torpedo struck one of destroyer escorts, splitting the whole deck in half. Bloodied body parts, paper, metal debris, and other assorted objects flew out of the impact zone. The other destroyers launched anti-submarine missiles into the deep waters. The U-boats' energy shields disintegrated the anti-sub missiles, the missiles' warheads leaking nuclear fuel into the water.

The wolfpack launched returned fire. Multiple torpedoes smacked the *Franklin D. Roosevelt* on its bow and starboard side. She keeled over as thousands of sailors jumped off the ship. Hundreds of bodies, alive and dead, floated amidst the lifeboats. Nearby destroyers raced to save the survivors.

Ulrich surfed through CBS, NBC, ABC, MSNBC and several other channels. A summer school shooting took place at a Catholic high school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. A news helicopter hovered over St. Margaret's Catholic High School. The school soon lived up to its namesake, the Catholic patroness of dying and falsely accused people.

Footage showed a platoon of heavily armed shooters got out of several matte-black Toyota Isis minivans. Armed with automatic rifles, grenade launchers, flamethrowers, and machine guns, they assaulted the building. Within minutes, police and SWAT units encircled the building.

Meanwhile, other news helicopters filmed smoldering buildings up and down the Potomac River. Federal troops and agents battled thousands of terrorists in a coup d'état against the US government. The ongoing fighting turned Washington DC into an American Stalingrad. The message was clear: 'America is under attack'.

Switching off the TV, Ulrich's jaw dropped. *Was I watching a movie?*

The satphone rang again. Ulrich tapped on Heinricka's shoulder. "Cousin, bring me my satphone."

"Why?" Heinricka asked.

"She might be calling us," he replied.

Heinricka ran back into the kitchen. She returned to Ulrich's side and handed him his satphone. The satphone was still ringing.

Placing the phone next to his ear, Ulrich said, "Ja?"

"Do believe me now?" Halfrida said.

"Ja, ja," he told her. "Tell the RGA to get my new A-Wing ready."

***

(*Twenty hours later*)

Cigar-shaped steel Zeppelins sailed through the scattered clouds, catapulting squadrons of flying discs and boomerang-shaped bombers out of their built-in flight decks. The armada blotted out the starlit skies and the clouds over the Atlantic. The Conspiracy, overconfident in its resolve, moved quickly to 'drop a bomb on the right place in New York'.

The Manhattan skyline appeared in the distance. With America's air forces stretched too thin for 'Operation Noble Eagle', Congress gave ~~RGA and Underground air forces~~ Private Military Contractors the green light to defend the homeland's skies like in *Independence Day*. Instead, a massive furball of Ryanite and Underground A-Wings battled each other for control of New York's airspace.

Ryanite pilots flew mostly St. Francis Fr100F fighters, miniaturized Messerschmitt Bf109Fs. Other Ryanites piloted Fr101F-1s, while others like Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka piloted twin-engine Fr150H-3s patterned after Messerschmitt Bf110G-2s. Their Underground enemy flew St. Faustina Fa-38As and Fa-35E, A-Wings modeled after the Soviet Yak-9 and MiG-3 respectively. Shooting each other down, they protested Congress' emergency request to defend the homeland.

Radio transmissions illustrated an ongoing air battle. An Underground Fa-35E sprayed laser beams at a Ryanite Fr100F. The Ryanite dodged his opponent's fire and bank hard right. "Phew," a Ryanite pilot chimed, "He almost had me."

"I missed," said the Underground pilot.

"Plaid Two, watch your tail, your tail!" Peter MacDonald, callsign 'Plaid One', screamed to his wingman. "Turn!"

"Splashed one!" the Underground pilot's wingman shouted.

Static filled Plaid Two's radio feed. "Can't see through the smoke! Ejecting!"

"Plaid Eminence," Peter MacDonald pleaded, "Get him off my six."

"Wilco." Ulrich dropped on the Fa-35Es' tails from above and lined the bandits up on his Heads Up Display. At night, the outside world was shaded in varying shades of green. His headset showed him two red diamonds chasing after a blue-colored diamond. *Come on, just a little bit closer*, he thought.

IFF acquired the enemy A-Wings in two separate targeting reticules. "Wunderbar!" Ulrich squeezed the trigger on his flight stick. Nose-mounted laser machine guns lit up. Bursts of laser beams blew both Fa-35Es out of the sky, sputtering and spiraling into the Atlantic. "Bandits down!"

"Thanks," Peter called out, his plane back-flipping and flying below Ulrich's.

Two more Underground fighters chased after Ulrich and Heinricka. "I'm on his tail," one of the pilots spoke. They hurled a laser fusillade at the cousins' A-Wing. Ulrich swerved his Fr150H-3, zigzagging in sharp left and right turns to dodge their fire. "Shoot them down!"

Heinricka, as Ulrich's copilot and rear gunner, unleashed her twin-mounted laser machine gun. She took careful shots not to hit their plane's tail. None of her shots managed to hit the pursuing bandits. "I can't get a good angle with my *Schrägwaffen*," she whined. "Keep this thing steady!"

The enemy fighters were still on their tail. They fired their nose-mounted guns. A few beams hit the cousins' Fr150H-3, their A-Wing still airworthy.

He called out to Heinricka. "*Bist du bereit?*"

"*Bereit!*" She declared to him that she was 'ready'.

Ulrich pulled the flight stick back towards him. The Fr150-3 reared up like a cobra preparing to strike, riding through the winds on its tail before slowing.

Heinricka opened fire at the two enemy fighters, destroying both of them before they had a chance to fly past them. Two fireballs were shown on Ulrich's camera. "Nice shooting, Cousin!"

"That's the last of them!" Peter MacDonald declared over the radio, amidst a wave of cheering Ryanite voices. "Plaid Eminence, let's take care of the Conspiracy before they can reach New York?"

"I hear you," Ulrich said, turning his A-Wing away from the New York City skyline. Traveling east, his fighter ascended upward. It drew sharp contrails as it flew toward the Conspiracy's aerial armada. Surviving Ryanite A-Wings flew alongside his, forming chevron formations of five, six, seven, or eight.

The dark skies brightened. Daylight was near. The Conspiracy's A-Wings and Zeppelins continued toward their target. Ryanite pilots over the cousins' radios voiced astonishment and shock.

"How the hell did they build those things?" one Ryanite blurted.

"Who knows, Mason," another responded. "They must have gotten the idea for building from some obscure German neo-Nazi sci-fi novel."

"They may look UFOs, but they're no different than our own," a third pilot, the voice of a college-aged woman, spoke.

"Fillmore's right," a four pilot said. "It all boils down to who has the best pilots, not the most advanced A-Wings."

"Then let's show them what we're made of!" Peter MacDonald boasted. "Rock and roll, people!"

The Conspiracy's flying boomerang bombers zoomed past the Ryanite fighters. Squadrons of Fr101s broke away from the rest and pursued the boomerangs at Mach 3, their A-Wings faster than the bombers. From behind, they engaged the boomerangs, breaking up their attack formations.

The flying disc fighters harassed the other Ryanite fighters. Laser and plasma cannon fire blew three Fr150H-3s out of the sky, forcing Ulrich and the other Fr150 pilots to evade their attacks. "Get them off our backs, Plaid One," Heinricka pleaded. "We can't engage the Zeppelin with them behind us."

"I'm on it," Peter answered, "Plaid Squadron proceeding to engage." He and the other Fr101s chased after the flying discs. A dogfight ensued between them, Plaid Squadron and others keeping the flying discs away from the cousins and the other Fr150s.

Puffs of dark plumes shook the cousins' A-Wing. Enemy FlaK cannons fired from coaxial turrets built into the Zeppelins had opened fire on them. Energy beams of AA gun tracers lit up the dim early morning. "Evasive maneuvers!" Ulrich barked at the other pilots. "Don't let them hit you!"

He and the other pilots steered their A-Wings through AA tracer fire and the plumes of FlaK cannons. They kept their composure, even as their engines trailed smoke and catching on fire, and wings and tails blown away from the fuselages. "Almost there…," he murmured to himself, waiting for his HUD to lock onto one of the Zeppelins. "…Just a bit more…"

The Fr150H-3s took turns strafing the Zeppelins from all directions. Red diamonds appeared over the floating cigars. "Need a light?" Ulrich laughed, popping a cap open on his flight stick and pressing down on a glowing amber button. "Have a nice trip!"

Ulrich and others pummeled the enemy Zeppelins with undercarriage-mounted gunpods that fired massive autocannon rounds into their steel-cladded airframes. Individual rounds pounded into the Zeppelins, ripping holes into them, others igniting fires inside their honeycombed hulls.

Heinricka and the other rear gunners emptied her twin-mounted laser machine guns at the turrets on each of the floating cigars. Turrets burst into flames, black smoke pouring out of them, while others were blown away from the rest of the Zeppelins' airframes.

For each Zeppelin they shot down, several Fr150H-3s were lost. They joined the dozens of enemy fighters sinking into the uninviting waters below. Other Fr100s and Fr101s joined them as well. The pitch-black sky brightened into a dark blue hue. A few scattered clouds hanging in the skies alongside the remaining Ryanite fighters.

"Did we get all of them?" Heinricka asked Ulrich.

"Looks like we did," he replied, watching the destroyed Zeppelins slowly descend into the Atlantic in flames. He steered his A-Wing toward the East Coast and sped away with the other surviving fighters.

"Plaid Eminence," Peter MacDonald spoke the cousins, "Do you read me?"

"We're reading you loud and clear," Ulrich answered. "What's up?"

"With leadership like yours, I'm surprised you haven't run for a position in the Republic Program," Peter said. "You know, my brother is a Representative of Philadelphia alongside his fiancé. And look, I know your cousin is the State Chancellor and all, but I think you should run, maybe start your own party."

"I'll think about it, if God knows that will help me grow in holiness," he told him, chuckling.

"And I know you will…," Heinricka muttered under her throat, the radio picking up her voice.

***

(Three weeks later)

GACSS, along with the rest of America, emerged stronger and more united in the aftermath following the so-called 'Harrisburg Incident'. While most of the country held its breath in suspense, the four Brotzman cousins' long-term war plans against the Underground and the Ostara Conspiracy went into motion.

Northeast Philly's Plaidstadt ('Plaid City'), an administrative headquarters built out of an abandoned three-story Catholic high school, served as the Ryanite version of Underground's Imperial Palace. A concrete wall, topped with razor-sharp Concertina wire, surrounded the complex. Squads of college-aged Ryanite sentries patrolled the grounds around the perimeter with German shepherds and Rottweiler dogs. More sentries posted at rooftop observation posts, scanning the skies above for hijacked passenger jets.

THE PLAID DREAM

Third Floor, Central Wing housed the State Chancellor Harold Brotzman's executive office. Harold was seated at his oak-furnished desk, a satphone held beside his ear. He chatted with a literary agent from a New York publishing house.

Halfrida stood on his right-hand side. Both he and his sister were dressed in their Bishop Dowell school uniforms. Neither twin was crossdressing. Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka stood silent on Harold's left-hand side, dressed in Neumann-Seton uniforms.

"If readers can't make it to this point without whining 'show-don't-tell' or 'info-dump', then don't even bother reading *Fame and Honor* or *The Plaid Dream*." Harold straightened his posture. "We have zero patience with you people bullying us around like *Der Führer*. Goodbye." He hung up, tossed the satphone at the desk, and shook his head.

"Why should we even bother with those people?" Halfrida yawned. "Don't they realize we've got a war to fight?"

"Ja, but weren't you and Harold supposed to be separated from each other around this time?" Ulrich reminded them, browsing through the pages of a copy of *Fame and Honor*.

"The Author intended that novel to be full of red herrings," Halfrida told him. "Besides, my brother has a bad memory."

"True," Harold voiced. "After all, we're in a series that is literally about parodying novels 'full of realities.'"

"Anyway, where were we?" Heinricka spoke.

Harold sat upright in his leather chair. "All of us remember the terrible things that had occurred these past three weeks. Like Indonesia under Sukarno, America is forever trapped in *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Sure, the President right now may be an African American, but his Indonesian is almost flawless."

"In other words," Halfrida clarified to her cousins, "Times are changing." She pounded the palm of her left hand with a clenched fist. "Most Americans no longer trust the current Administration to keep America safe. But Democrat or Republican, I don't think anyone wants to be president after what happened."

"So Howard Wolff's bound to be the next President in November?" Heinricka voiced. "That's surreal!"

"Last time I checked, the Underground and the Conspiracy aren't sovereign nations." Halfrida stroked her chin. "The same applies for GACSS. Like him or not, the President isn't going to be like FDR after Pearl Harbor. Nobody in the military or intelligence community wants to deal with those two either."

"Short and sweet," Harold added, "We've got the green light from Washington to go after Underground and Conspiracy on our own terms."

"Thank God," Ulrich and Heinricka chanted.

"My opinion of the government is way higher now than before we had this meeting," Halfrida added. "Remind me again, Harold…" She eyed him. "We don't have to deal with the Pentagon, Langley, and what not?"

Harold nodded. "The catch is that GACSS becomes the sole government contractor in Anomalies." He sipped on a glass of grape juice. "This means we've been barred from selling them to anyone and everyone except Washington."

"I'm sure we'll find a way to bypass that Catch-22," Halfrida mumbled.

"And Cousin Ulrich and I are supposed to trust the Americans?" Heinricka questioned. "How do we know FBI isn't going to hand me over to Interpol?"

"Or better yet," Ulrich chimed, pounding his chest. "Are they going to throw me out of this country since I'm living here illegally?"

"Don't worry." Halfrida rolled her eyes. "They will keep their promises."

"But those promises aren't going to be easy to keep," Heinricka objected.

Halfrida giggled, shaking her head, eyes closed. "Come on, have we forgotten that we're paying trillions to keep this country afloat?" She leaned against the window behind Harold's chair. "$300,000,000,000,000 can buy a lot of leverage in a place as big as the United States."

Harold chuckled. "If Washington decides to lay its hands on you and Ulrich, let's stop sending another dollar to them and watch what happens." He glanced at his cousins. "Nobody in America wants to be taxed to death or cut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, EBT and food stamps, and the military."

"This whole country is going to be our instrument to spearhead GACSS and make Catholic Education great again!" Halfrida declared. "With Howard Wolff, everything else will fall into place!" She laughed.

"But it's up to us to see to it that things happen our way," Harold chimed.

Heinricka shrugged her shoulders.

"Okay, so where do we begin?" Ulrich asked.

"With the government off our backs, we can finally do everything we've always wanted with GACSS." Harold leaned back, resting his hands behind the back of his head. "Our friends and enemies have no idea what our next move is. Let's keep it that way and pursue our true objective: making Catholic Education great again."

Halfrida turned to her cousins. "The real question my brother and I are still asking is this: where are your loyalties? To us or to your Opa and the side of the family that supports him?"

Harold chuckled. "'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.'"

"*Wir sind treu bis in den Tod, Cousinen!* (We are faithful until death, cousins!)" Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka reassured Halfrida and Harold.

A large mischievous grin appeared on Halfrida's face. "*Gut. Lassen us anfangen, Kameraden!* (Good. Let's begin, Comrades!)" Giggling, she tilted her head at Harold and nodded.

Chapter Twelve: Brotzmanskrieg (His Plaid Eminence; August 13th-20th, 2012)

"Fear not profanation; hesitate no longer to carry out your designs for My glory."
-The Lord's voice to St. John Neumann

Brotzmanskrieg ('Brotzman's War'). American Catholic Education, personified as a white dove, rose out its ashes and soared upward into the skies and beyond. The Brotzman cousins' sought to make it great again through German political statecraft, $300,000,000,000,000, Cardinal Wolk, Howard Wolff, and enough firepower to turn the War on Terror into World War III. 'Smart Power' served as the *Blitzkrieg* ('Lightning War') and *Weltanschauungskrieg* ('Worldview War') of their strategies.

Through Harold's 'Soft Power', GACSS attracted the sympathy of America and the rest of the Catholic world. Stronger bonds with the Remnants pursued. New ties with other Catholic school systems forged. An influential mass-media fostered an influential Catholic youth counterculture. Non-Catholic Americans saw the Ryanites as the key to restoring their nation's once impressive industries. Ryanites in American Catholic schools outside the Republic Program's influence received diplomatic support.

Through Halfrida's 'Hard Power', GACSS coerced and threatened those seeking to harm it with military precision. Anti-Catholic students and teachers banished. Enemy spies rooted out. Government and corporate skullduggery hostile to GACSS deterred. Death squads roamed the Earth for Lady Ostara. RGA MAFVs and troops held their ground, ready to advance into the Dweller World and Underground's colonial holdings in Otherworld.

Through Ulrich's 'Economic Power', GACSS flexed its industrial might for both war and peace. Poor families received incentives to send their children to the schools. Waste and fraud eradicated. High school students received opportunities for high-paying internships and ways to pay off their tuition. Catholic families with more than two children received tuition cuts for every child enrolled in the schools. Teenage mothers found the support and help in their school communities. New afterschool clubs, electives, and apprenticeships created.

Through Heinricka's 'Sharp Power', GACSS maintained its reputation to the outside world and destroyed anything that tarnished it. Child sex abuse scandals eradicated from American Catholic dioceses. Packs of internet bots posing as Russian bots detonated devastating logic bombs at key enemy internet propaganda outlets. Heresies suppressed. Hostile lawsuits flattened. Dissent crushed.

All of that and more were embodied as an optimistic Ryanite propaganda poster within a picture frame, hanging on a wall in the living room of Chandler's house. The words of St. John Neumann accompanied this beautiful piece of work. It read: '*Our Catholic youth can be saved only by Catholic schools.*'

Cousin Ulrich sat on the couch in the living room, tinkering with the internals of a bulky headset on a table. The headset, made of solid stainless steel

and painted matte-black, had several rubber wires sticking out of it. The wires converged into a central tube, the tube itself connected to a pocket-sized generator. A Tesla Anomaly, a bluish crystallized object, spun rapidly inside the generator, powering the device.

Heinricka entered the room, yawning and stretching her arms. "Guten Morgen, Cousin," she called out to him.

"Guten Morgen," Ulrich retorted. He opened a small panel on the headset and twisted a row of knobs, adjusting them to various positions.

"What are you doing?" she pondered, still lingering by the entranceway to the house's foyer and front door.

"Working on this thing," he answered.

"Ja, but what is it?" Heinricka pointed her finger at it.

"Some device Cousin Halfrida sent me the other day," he clarified. "They called it a 'TCR', a Telepathic Chat Relay."

"A TCR, where have I heard of that?" Heinricka strutted to the side of the table, bending over to get a closer look. "Wasn't that an experimental device that the Remnants were developing during the Rosy War?"

He nodded. "Korrekt, it's one of the many wonders provided by the Anomalies. The Remnants intended it to give field commanders an ability to have a full bird-eye view of the battlefield. It also gave them the ability to communicate with individual soldiers through telepathy."

Putting on the headset, Ulrich adjusted the visor in front of his eyes. He looked around the room. "But the Rosy War ended before the Remnants had time to complete its development. The project was apparently abandoned as well, before Lady Ostara picked it up and resumed development."

"Where'd you hear that?" she asked.

"Halfrida told me all about it." The device failed to operate as intended. Ulrich stroked his chin. "Why is this thing not working?"

"Anomalies are different from most metals and minerals," Heinricka explained. "They are all dependent on your ability to conceptualize their known abilities, if that makes any sense."

"Nein, I don't understand that."

Heinricka paused. "Okay, well, try this: visualize Chandler for just a few seconds. See if you can get a hold of him."

"Are you sure that's going to work?"

She nodded her head. "If I'm right, that headset and its generator are made of a special Anomaly called 'Jung'." Heinricka knocked on the headset's thick shell. "Jung is said to be great for augmenting the power of smartphones and satphone, making them immune to signal jamming." She knocked on the headset again. "Ja, this stainless-steel is imbued with the Jung Anomaly."

"How can you tell?" Ulrich voiced.

"Most Anomalies, when imbued with something, give the affected object a matte-black color. They also harden and toughen the exterior as well." Heinricka smirked. "Are you getting a fix on Chandler's position?"

"Give me a couple seconds." Ulrich meditated and visualized Chandler. Sitting still with his eyes closed, he focused his mental energies on him. The TCR transported his consciousness to a black void, away from the comfort of Chandler's living room.

A black void greeted him when he opened his eyes. *Where am I?* A bright light pierced the darkness in front of him. *I guess it is working.*

The voice of Heinricka bounced in the darkness. "Cousin, Cousin, can you hear me? Hallo?" The TCR acted like a two-way radio, Heinricka and Ulrich's brains serving as transceiver and receiver and vice versa. The device stimulated Ulrich cochlea, the tiny bones in his ears, broadcasting Heinricka's thoughts and voice to the region of his brain responsible for the processing of sound.

"Ja, can you hear me?" Ulrich spoke.

"No way!" Heinricka declared. "You're speaking to me in my head and your lips aren't even moving!"

"Keep your voice down!" he whispered. "You're going to make me deaf!"

"Okay!" Heinricka lowered her volume. "What do you see around you?"

"A lot of darkness," he reported. "It's a little cold. There's a bright light on the other end. Should I walk into it?"

"Well, you're not dead yet, so why not?"

"*Ja, aber natürlich.*" Ulrich swam toward the light, the light growing brighter and brighter the closer he got until it consumed him whole.

The light subsided. The TCR treated him to a bird's eye view of an area in Otherworld's Eden continent. He felt his consciousness hanging thousands of feet in the air, above the clouds. Thinking about Chandler caused him to descend past the clouds and toward the cloud.

On the surface, snow fell like white confetti over an icy wasteland somewhere in a place called 'Other-Iowa.' The fresh layer of snow covered a field of dead Underground soldiers and burning MAFVs. A company of RGA soldiers, dressed in white winter fatigues and parkas, were holed up in trenches and foxholes near a forest. Machine gun nests, antitank guns, and FlaK guns fortified behind wooden palisades and sandbags.

Chandler, wielding a trench shovel, plowed through the ice and dirt in his foxhole. He shared his foxhole with an RGA soldier who had recently died in a battle not too long ago. "I wish that guy didn't die on me," he sighed.

Ulrich tried to communicate with him. "Hey Chandler," he whispered to him, "Are you coming with us to school next week?"

The voice startled Chandler. He stopped shoveling and scanned his surroundings, wondering where Ulrich's voice came from. "Who said that?" He shrugged his shoulders and continued shoveling.

Shutting off the device, Ulrich propelled his consciousness back to Chandler's living room. He pulled up the visor and took off the headset, setting it aside on the table. He turned to Heinricka.

"Did you get to see Chandler?" she asked.

He nodded. "He's going to take his time over there."

"So he's not coming to St. Maria Goretti with us next Monday?"

"I think he is, but I can't tell for certain."

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(*One week later*)

Dark storm clouds formed in the morning skies over Iowa. They blotted out the sun and her rosy fingers. Strong winds blew through Davenport from the west, from Lincoln, Nebraska. Next to his neighborhood park entrance, Chandler, Ulrich, and Heinricka leaned on the chain link fence, dressed in St. Maria Goretti school uniforms.

For Chandler and Ulrich, the uniform was a royal blue sweater, white dress shirt with blue and white necktie, khaki pants and black oxfords. For Heinricka, hers had a knee-length khaki skirt and a pair of white knee socks. The three had the school insignia on their left breast, 'St. Maria Goretti' in silver blackletter.

"Is your Cousin Halfrida coming?" Chandler asked the cousins. He yawned and whipped out his smartphone and pushed the web browser app.

"The weather doesn't look encouraging." Heinricka pointed at the sky.

A flying disc stopped hundreds of feet above their heads. It hovered in the clouds, hiding. A small port on the bottom of the airframe opened. Lens protruded out of it. The pilot adjusted it to get a focused shot at Chandler. The disc snapped several brief still shots of him without Chandler's knowledge. It ascended upward at amazing speed, disappearing into the clouds.

Chandler's eyes remained glued to *Catholic School Observer's* website. He smiled, upon seeing CSO's new and official website. A headline accompanying an image at the top of the site appeared onscreen. "Opportunity Awaits GACSS," he spoke.

Pressing the image brought him to the headline article's webpage. "With the Republic Program in full swing," he continued, "Opportunity awaits the Catholic school students under its shadow. Those attending Catholic schools in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri rejoice! Greater Catholic Education is here!"

"How nice of them," Heinricka muttered.

"But what the future holds is anyone's guess." Ulrich leaned his back against a sturdy chain-link fence.

"Prior to the Republic Program," Chandler stated, "The Catholic schools saved America $22,000,000,000. I swear to our magnificent God that, with the Republic Program, we'll save the government a hundred times that amount."

"And we will, *Kamerad*!" Ulrich pointed his finger at him.

Switching off his phone, Chandler rotated his head to the left. In the distance, he spotted Halfrida approaching them from the north, hands wrapped around a leather briefcase. He whistled and waved his arm at her.

"There she is." Ulrich gestured at her.

"And not a moment too soon." Heinricka snagged the strap of her backpack, pulling it off the sidewalk and rushed through the street to meet her.

Halfrida dashed toward the three in a female Bishop Dowell uniform, her bottle blonde hair tied in pigtails. Halfrida's hair bobbed as she walked up to them.

The grip on the handle of the briefcase loosened. "This disguise convincing enough, isn't it?"

"Looking good," Chandler whistled, grinning.

"Ditch the uniform and you'll blend right in," Heinricka spoke.

"You think?" Heinricka smirked, stood upright on her toes, and embraced Chandler. Her lips touched his.

"It goes a long way toward executing our next move," Ulrich chimed.

"And what's that?" Chandler tilted his head at Ulrich.

Ulrich pointed at the briefcase.

"What's inside?" Chandler asked Halfrida.

"$750,000," Halfrida replied, "All in used tens and twenties. Legit."

He smirked. "Don't tell me your family dabbles in funny money."

"Maybe in the old days," she confessed, "But not anymore."

"Not good enough." Chandler took the briefcase from her and opened it. She wasn't joking: inside were large stacks of ten and twenty dollar bills. "Refresh my memory, Halfrida." He closed the briefcase.

Heavy Rain descended from dreary skies. Strong winds howled like the cries of decadent sinners condemned to the depths of Hell, forever separated from the Kingdom of God. Raindrops rolled down their faces.

"Find Marcus," she reminded him. "Offer him the money in exchange for a Bolzano Anomaly. Come back to Lance's house once classes are over."

"What about me and Ulrich?" Heinricka cracked her knuckles.

"Just my boyfriend," Halfrida laughed.

Chandler laughed alongside her. "What's the story about this Bolzano?"

"Only one fast way to find out," Ulrich whispered to him.

"You got plans?" Heinricka asked Halfrida.

"Maybe," Halfrida retorted.

"Fair enough." Chandler wiped the raindrops from his face. "Well, I'm off to St. Maria Goretti." He and the two Brotzman cousins walked away from her.

Halfrida turned around, watching them leave her. The dense rainfall intensified. "Shouldn't you hitch a ride in my Mercedes?" she hollered.

"Nein," Ulrich shouted back, "Save it for another time."

Chandler strolled out of his neighborhood and reached the main road. He traveled along the adjacent sidewalk to get to his school. The downpour got heavier, the wind spreading it all around like confetti on someone's birthday party.

To his left, a long fleet of Fords, Chevys, Buicks, and Nissans rolled out of Owl Valley, the neighborhood on the opposite side of the main road. With turning lights, they turned left and converged on the main road. The cars followed the road to St. Maria Goretti.

The trip to St. Maria Goretti was marked with bitter sentiment. The Brotzman cousins strolled shoulder-to-shoulder in front of Chandler. Chandler buried his hands in the pockets of his leather overcoat to keep them warm. Memories of the past flooded into his mind. The past accompanied him, speaking in disembodied voices, reminding him of how far he had gone.

The sidewalk ended at an intersection. A column of commuting cars rolled past the street. They walked to the traffic light pole and pushed the button on a small panel. The traffic lights turned red. Cars traveling on the horizontal road came to a complete stop. On another traffic light pole at the other side of the street, a white light appeared. They crossed the street.

The school building appeared in the distance. Three-stories building, it welcomed Chandler and the cousins with open arms. Brotzmanskrieg welcomed a new credo: 'it's morning again in Catholic America.'

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School bells proclaimed the beginning of fifth period. Students flooded the halls on their way to the cafeteria for lunch, their next class, or their study hall room. Familiar faces merged among crowds of new ones. Pairs of Civil Guards patrolled the halls. Some stood by in the halls, watched their peers roam across the building. An emblem of a brass dove was pinned to their dress shirt collars, marking them as prefects. No one dared to break school regulations, let alone matters of faith and morals, under their watch.

At the senior wing on the third floor, Chandler opened his locker. The briefcase was stuffed inside, resting atop a shelf. Not a single dollar was taken. Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka stopped by the opposite side of Chandler's locker. They waited for him.

"Where are we heading?" Heinricka asked him.

"School store, Commissary Commandant," Chandler responded. Grabbing the briefcase by the handle, he closed the locker, gestured at the cousins and walked away. Heinricka and Ulrich nodded their heads and followed suit.

Down the hall, he overheard a conversation. A lone guardsman accosted a female student. "Excuse me, miss," he said.

The girl's khaki skirt was several inches shorter than the allowed length. "Yeah, what is it?"

"Your skirt's too short." He pulled out a pen and a thick sheet of carbon paper from his pocket. "I'm going to have to write you up for a demerit."

"Do you have to?" she complained.

"Here at St. Maria Goretti, everything's done by the book."

Chandler and the cousins walked past them. A staircase appeared on his left. He followed it to the ground floor and turned right on a long corridor. In the corridor, two students swept the floor with brooms. Their brooms and dustpans collected large balls of dust, tiny bits of dirt, and specks of dander and hair. Each class period had student janitors to keep the school clean.

On the way to the store, they strolled past a Ryanite Jackbooter at his locker. "Hey Chandler, you got a second?" the Jackbooter whispered to him.

Chandler stopped by his locker. "Sure, but not for long."

The Jackbooter opened the locker, revealing a vast assortment of candies and other sweets. "Can I interest you in something?"

Chandler shook his head. "Not interested. How about I ask you something?"

"Sure thing," the Jackbooter replied.

"How's business?"

A pair of Civil Guards chatted as they passed by him, Chandler, and the cousins. "Things got better after the Fourth Plenary Council." The Jackbooter breathed a sigh of relief. "Ryanites like me can now operate out in the open so long as we split our profits with the school."

"But it's not like anyone in the Real World knows a clue or two about our Secret School Economy," Ulrich added.

"Some things are meant to be left unanswered," Heinricka whispered to him.

"What about competition?" Chandler set the briefcase down to crack his knuckles. "Schools like ours have a school store manned by a Commissary Commandant. Pretty much anything and everything the Republic Program makes can be bought from that guy."

"But that's all he sells." The Jackbooter closed his locker door. "Guys like me offer the other half of what our SSE has to offer."

"I know, right?" Chandler walked away from the Jackbooter. "Later."

The school store was a short walk away from the Jackbooter's locker. Inside, shelves showcased Republic-made media, foodstuffs and other trinkets. A lone Commissary Commandant was resting his head on the store counter, dozing off. Like the janitors and the Civil Guard, every class period had its own on-duty Commissary Commandant.

Chandler walked into the room. He glanced at the items on sale and approached the counter. A customer call bell was placed on the counter, next to the cash register. He rang it.

The Commissary Commandant woke up. He stretched his arms. "Welcome to the school store," he said. "How may I help you?"

"I'm looking for Marcus." Chandler looked over his shoulder. "Seen him?"

"Senior Lounge," The Commissary Commandant answered.

Chandler shook his hand and left the school store. The Commandant closed the catalogue and returned it to his backpack. He returned to his nap.

The senior lounge at St. Maria Goretti occupied a room on the third floor. The room overlooked the sports fields behind the school building. Its door remained closed at all times throughout the day.

"Is someone outside?" a male voice called out.

"Hey, it's Chandler. Could you let me in?"

"You're the boss." The door opened. A guardsman welcomed him. "Chandler, it's good to see you." He peeked around the corners of the hallway. "You weren't being followed, were you?"

Chandler chuckled. "Of course, I'm not."

"Then come inside," he beckoned.

Past the door, the senior lounge was a bazaar of Jackbooters offering a huge array of wares from various tables. Anomalies, food, tools, knick-knacks, cosmetics and more adorned the tables. A few dozen students window-shopped, haggled, and bartered with the Jackbooters.

Not all Jackbooters specialized in the sale of goods. Babysitters, lawnmowers, pet groomers, housekeepers, and offered their services to oncoming students. One Jackbooter sat at a couch facing two recliners. "Looking to start your own business?" he announced. "We got plenty of vacant business up for sale."

Across the room, several students gathered around a female student operating a newsstand in front of the curtained window. "My fellow Ryanites, I have news from our armies at the front," she declared to them. "Earlier today, RGA troops have crossed the Ryanite-Dweller Border and occupied the town of Bedrock Mills. The IDA had retreated from the town in droves."

The crowd cheered. "That'll teach those Dwellers not to mess with us," someone called out.

"Emperor Raynerson's Underground better watch out," another added.

"Meanwhile, the Protestant youths of the Fellowship of Young Christians are making moves to support the Kohler Act. What does the future hold for the SSEs in the United States?" She motioned the crowd to the table. "Get all the latest news from this free special edition of *Catholic School Observer* today."

The crowd picked up their copies of CSO from the table before dispersing.

Marcus McAlister had a table situated next to the girl's newsstand. His spit-shined jackboots kicked up on the table, he browsed the internet on his smartphone. A sign was posted in front of the table. *Eddie Mack Trading House–Davenport Branch*, it read in English, German, and Latin. An inactive Teleportation Transponder rested on the floor next to his chair.

Chandler knocked on the table. "Hey, it's me."

"Yo." Marcus brought his feet down on the floor and put his phone away.

"Guten Tag," Ulrich greeted.

"Guten Tag," Heinricka added.

"Ja, ja, Guten Tag..." Marcus shook the cousins' hands, first Ulrich's, and then Heinricka's. He asked Chandler, "You got the money Eddie Mack asked?"

"Everything's here." Chandler placed the briefcase on the table and opened it, showing Marcus the money.

"What's the story about the Bolzano Anomaly?" Ulrich mused.

"Bought it off a Ryanite from back east who came through the school's Teleportation Transponder." Marcus counted the money inside the briefcase.

"Nein," Ulrich corrected, "I'm talking about the Anomaly itself."

"Ah," Marcus paused. "Among the rarest of Anomalies, Bolzano is prized for its ability to bend the Law of Gravity. Its parent Anomaly Causing Phenomena (ACP), Merry-Go-Round, reflects this aspect of Bolzano." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a copy of a page about the Anomaly from a book about known ACPs and Anomalies. "Take a look, Ulrich."

Ulrich took the page from him. He unfolded it and glanced at the text. The page featured an image of the Merry-Go-Round, taken on an unknown date, somewhere in the Otherworld. Mutilated carcasses, both human and animal, were scattered across an open field. A reddish mist hovered above the ground. In it, someone was being dragged in the air like an unwitting ragdoll.

"That has to hurt!" Chandler's eyebrows rose. He read aloud a sentence that made his jaw drop. "Due to its rarity, even the most unrefined samples can fetch up to $750,000."

"Are we talking refined or unrefined?" Ulrich pondered.

"The guy said it's refined," Marcus recalled.

The word 'refined' sent alarm bells ringing inside Ulrich's head. "May I ask how this Ryanite procured it?"

Marcus' eyes darted across the room. He leaned his body over the table and whispered into Ulrich's ear. "Do you really want to know?"

Slamming the briefcase shut, Ulrich replied, "I'm the one who's paying, not my Cousin Halfrida!" He pointed his finger at his heart.

He, Heinricka, Chandler, and Marcus chuckled together.

"If you say so," Marcus spoke. "A couple days ago, this guy broke into a Catholic School Underground storehouse in Other-Boston. The seller claimed that a friend of a friend knew the guy who burglarized the joint."

"The storehouse was a huge building." Marcus formed two horizontal L's with both hands, holding them high above the table. "Shelves high as this school's ceiling had row after row of glass boxes containing rare Anomalies. In one of those boxes was the Bolzano Anomaly that you're now planning to purchase."

"So this guy stole it then?" Heinricka voiced.

"Except he didn't just steal it from any storehouse," Marcus said.

"There's a catch?" Heinricka's jaw dropped.

"The storehouse belonged to the House of Raynerson!" Marcus banged a clenched fist against the table. "Sick bastards kept all these hard-to-get Anomalies like trophies or something. And Duchess Perpetua sent people looking for it."

"What happened to the guy who stole the Bolzano?" Chandler wondered.

"Feds found his body in a lake." Marcus rolled his eyes, trying to remember. "Had a free helicopter ride. Three days before his parents reported him missing."

Heinricka squirmed. Chandler eyes flew open. Ulrich gagged in nausea.

"I know, it's a closed casket," Marcus added, relaxing his hands on the table. "Thing is, are you sure you guys want to buy this?"

"What happens if we purchase it?" Chandler voiced.

"Eddie Mack will subsidize your funeral costs." Marcus said in a nonchalant voice, patting on Chandler's shoulder. "Just don't be surprised if someone smothers you in your sleep at 2AM. Or your parents finding your dead, tied-up corpse inside some dude's trunk with a tarot card in your mouth."

Chandler tilted his head to the side. "How come they haven't found it yet?"

"Duchess Perpetua thinks Eddie Mack has it, not me. It's the reason why I'm still breathing and sharing this stuff with you, Chandler." Marcus pulled his shirt collar with his index finger. "You sure you want this? I hold no responsibility if something happens to you three."

"God gave me us all life one life to live." Chandler's shoulders rose.

Ulrich nodded in reply. "Oh, ja, we're buying it."

Chapter Thirteen: Rapallo, 1922: The Sequel
(Fair Knight and Renate; Aug. 19th-Sept. 4th, 2012)

"Today's a perfect time for some insider trading and government manipulation."
-Francine Cardington-McAdams

Once school ended, Chandler strolled down the concrete sidewalk in Lance's neighborhood. Streetlamps kept the path ahead of him lit. Armies of crickets chirped and frogs ribbited in the distance. He straddled the backpack with the package inside. The road ahead converged on a three-way road. A Cadillac luxury sedan cruised down the street, passing Chandler before disappearing into the night. Stars filled the moonless sky above.

Marcus' warnings from earlier were still on his mind. Paranoia kept him on edge. He had his trusty Smith & Wesson Model 39 holstered on his hip. Platoons of imaginary assassins concerned him. Firing several rounds in the air, scaring the locals and attracting loud police sirens were the least of his worries.

Hundreds of feet in the air, three disc-shaped air vehicles hovered over the neighborhood in a tight formation. The flying discs, without warning, conducted elaborate maneuvers. They yawed backwards and ascended in ninety degree turns. They darted around the skies before zooming away into the night.

Chandler smacked a mosquito that landed on his cheek. He traveled along the street to his left. Further down the road, a cul-de-sac with three large houses appeared on his right. He crossed the street and went to the one in the middle.

The house had a glass storm door behind the main one. As he closed in, a Labrador Retriever barked from the backyard of the adjacent houses. He pushed the doorbell. A chiming noise reverberated throughout the house.

The front patio lights flickered to life and the front door opened. Lance stood on the side of the doorway. "Oh hi," he spoke through the glass door.

"I came to deliver the Bolzano." Chandler settled his backpack on the ground between his feet. He unzipped his backpack and grabbed the package.

Lance unlocked the storm door, opened it, and took the package from Chandler. He then placed it on the steps of the stairs behind him.

"Is that it? Just a simple odd-job that Halfrida couldn't do herself?"

"Don't worry; it's for a good cause." Lance reached for the handle of a leather briefcase below a wall-mounted shelf full of keys. He handed it to Chandler. "It's from Halfrida." He winked.

Chandler opened the briefcase. Inside were stacks of one hundred dollar bills. He whistled at sight of the money. "Lance, how much money am I looking at?"

"$750,000," Lance said, "The exact value of the Bolzano." He scanned the cul-de-sac behind Chandler. "Are you done? Halfrida's waiting for me."

Chandler nodded. "Tell her I said 'hi', alright?"

"I'll let you know. Good night."

"Good night." Chandler turned around and walked away from the patio.

Lance returned to the living room, turning on the lights as he entered. "I got your package, Halfrida." He placed it on a table in front of a sofa.

Halfrida was seated on a living room couch. "I made a wise choice. This Anomaly will pay for itself." She brought the package to her lap and opened it.

"You don't say?" Lance tilted his head to the side.

"It's one of the rarest Anomalies anyone can find in the Otherworld."

"Cutting to the chase, how will this Anomaly help us?"

"Last month, my brother decided to align GACSS with your boss," Halfrida explained. "Apparently, he wanted to find a way to bypass the embargoes Raynerson imposed on the Ryanites. Now your boss is working for my brother."

"Yeah, and then Mack came up with this two-prong plan: have Hannelore Bauer scour the other Catholic school systems for allies, while someone else prevent Raynerson from gathering his."

"That brings us to two Great Powers sitting on the sidelines, the Protestant Fellowship of Young Christians and the Communist Dwellers of the People's Northwestern Union." Halfrida motioned Lance to look at the documents on the table. "I have two sets of intel, one for each."

Lance went to the table and glanced at the papers. "Are these yours?"

"Yes," she replied. "They're my intelligence reports on those two. From what I can tell, PNU Premier Chairman Andreas Ricci remains indifferent; he's already invading his neighbors, these three Dweller kingdoms."

"Dweller politics is *complicated*." Halfrida scratched her scalp. "Those Dweller kingdoms aren't with the Independent Dweller Party. The IDP, the Underground's ally, makes up the bulk of the Dweller World. Oh, and that's not including the Dweller communities up in Canada."

"That's way too complicated for me to grasp," Lance muttered. "What do you know about the FYC?"

"Read my intelligence report and see for yourself."

The documents on the FYC provided an in-depth analysis on the McAdams, the family that lorded over the Great Power. "Generalissimo Patrick McAdams rules the FYC, with Lloyd, one of his siblings, as his lieutenant," it read. "The brothers' siblings hold various positions in the FYC, and both brothers listen to their considerations. However, those same family members are divided over whether to support Brotzman or Raynerson."

"Lloyd, Patrick's designated successor, insists alignment with Raynerson's Underground," the report continued. "Francine McAdam, the third child, backs support for Brotzman's GACSS. Her motives, as of late, are unknown. One fact is certain: whoever forms an alliance with the FYC and its ally, the People's Northwestern Union, will tip the balance of power in their favor."

"An ally like those two could bring an early end to Brotzmanskrieg," Lance told Halfrida. "What's the plan?"

Halfrida pointed at Lance's chest. "I need you to make arrangements to have me meet this Francine. She might the person my brother needs."

"Why do you want me to do it? Can't you let the Chandler do the work?"

"Does Francine McAdams even know who Chandler is? She knows you, me, and Hannelore Bauer. And Hannelore's helping your boss find friends in the other Catholic school systems for my brother."

"So that narrows things down to me, huh?"

Halfrida nodded. "Besides, somebody has to keep an eye out for Ostara and whatever she's doing with these flying discs." She dialed Francine's number on her satphone and handed it to Lance.

***

(*One week later*)

The afternoon sun hung over the Texan countryside. A dirt path diverged from a long, winding country road. Along the dirt path, herds of cattle grazed freely in fields of grass. Teenage boys rode on horseback with watchdogs in tow. The boys, clad in cowboy hats, looked after the herds with Henry repeater rifles.

The path led to a three-hundred-acre ranch with barns, horse stables, chicken coops, and a four-door car garage. An eighty-acre Victorian-era mansion, three stories high, stood in the middle of the ranch, protected by concrete walls and a steel gate. Atop the gate was a sign that read, *Welcome to the McAdams Ranch*. Several armed teenagers guarded the steel gate from inside the compound.

From a walk-in closet inside the mansion, an elevator descended thousands of feet beneath the surface. It reached a circular chamber that branched off into five wings, each one corresponding to a certain field of interest to the FYC. The wings led to floor-tiled hallways so long they extended beyond the vanishing point. Lining the halls were doors locked behind keypad locks and retinal scanners.

Inside an unmarked room, Halfrida Brotzman sat at the end of a long table that almost stretched the entire room's length. Her eyes stared straight into the hazel pupils of Francine McAdams, seated on the opposite end of the table. Lance sat alongside Halfrida, his wrist handcuffed to a briefcase containing the Bolzano Anomaly.

An uneasy tension pervaded the room. Francine's ash blonde hair bobbed as she uncrossed her legs. "Do you want something to eat or drink?" she asked Halfrida, pulling out her satphone. "Shall I call the maids?"

"No need," Halfrida responded. "This is a new business arrangement that's between the two of us."

"It's a little too risky for the FYC to be sending arms and training RGA troops in secret," Francine objected.

"RGA's got nothing to do with this." Halfrida rolled her eyes. "The Remnants got the Ryanites covered for that stuff."

Francine smirked. "Or was it?" She gestured at Lance. "I didn't think you would accompany him." The girl giggled. "My, how long has it been since our families were colluding like this?"

"It hasn't been that long since the Crossfront Coup." Halfrida sighed.

"Mushroom clouds don't bloom overnight, Halfrida." Francine giggled. "I'm talking about the Raynerson-Nazi Affair. Bauer, Raynerson, Cardington, Wolff, McAdams…we all backed your family's old company, Adalbert Munitions."

"True," Halfrida said. "Some foolish business about research in some Jesuit priest's pet project. Since America was planning to join the Allies, our ancestors realized that a US hostile to Hitler's Germany would be bad for business."

"That led us to our botched assassination of FDR and seizure of the federal government. When Smedley Butler didn't behave, we resorted to another plan: Operation Bernhardt. Industrialize counterfeit cash, and the American and British economies will crumble."

"But it failed when the FBI caught wind of this spy ring, Francine," she reminded her. "The next plan was installing Alistair Raynerson, the Raynerson family's patriarch, into the White House. Again, that too failed."

"Are you now seeing a trend? *History repeats itself*." Francine clapped her hands, grinning. "I find it interesting how the Lord predestined our families to meet again in the middle of another war, *Brotzmanskrieg*."

"Tell me about it." Halfrida rolled her eyes. "Did God allow our families, along with the others, to side with the National Socialists?"

"Perhaps that was His intention all along." Francine cackled. "Our families are no different. We're all going to Hell when this war is all over."

"I disagree." Halfrida shook her head. "Our ancestors sided with Hitler because they convinced themselves that American Exceptionalism was a scourge."

"Ah, the problem that Catholics like Saints Elizabeth Ann Seton and John Neumann had faced." Francine laughed. "I find it amusing how some Catholics saw Americanism as a heresy back in the day."

"That was because of people like the No-Nothings and their backers, the Freemasons." Halfrida slid her hand across her throat.

"At the same time, America was going to compete with the forces of Socialism. The 'Eastern Front' served as a litmus test for the most competitive version. A Cold War between America and Nazi Germany would have been an interesting." Francine cracked a smile. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"What does the past have to do with *Brotzmanskrieg*?" Halfrida crossed her arms. "I see no connection."

"*History repeats itself*," Francine repeated. "The Ryanites lagged behind other Great Powers in control of Otherworld's Anomalies, their industries lacking adequate SSEs to trade for goods." She pointed at Halfrida. "And under your brother, they're now experiencing population growth. All this, and how GACSS decided to start a war, the Ryanites aren't different from the Nazis."

"Harold and I aren't like our ancestors," Halfrida asserted. "Everyone wants to go to Heaven. It's up to us, as Christians, to make the right decisions. Francine, Lance and I visited your family's ranch for that reason alone."

Francine leaned towards the table. "And what is that?"

"Would the FYC be interested in siding with the GACSS?" Halfrida patted Lance's shoulder. Lance got up and approached Francine with the briefcase. He opened it and showed her the Bolzano Anomaly. "Consider the Bolzano a gift from my family," Halfrida told her.

"That might be a tough bargain." Francine faced Halfrida. "I may be an influential voice around here but siding with the Ryanites isn't popular." She crossed her legs. "May I interest you in some renegotiation?"

Halfrida crossed her arms. "What do you have in mind?"

"I know powerful people in Washington who have something to do with the 'Kohler Act,'" Francine replied. "This general ban on sweets and junk food in America's schools, everyone thinks it's about fighting childhood obesity. Yet no one has realized it's true goal: to destabilize and restructure this country's SSEs."

Halfrida's curiosity piqued. "Interesting, what else do you know?"

"One of its key targets is the Ryanite SSE."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"You're not surprised?"

"Your older brothers have been gunning toward the Kohler Act since the end of the Rosy War," Halfrida recalled. "Fighting the War on Drugs is like fighting the War on Alcoholism–'Prohibition', if you will."

Lance nodded his head. "Yeah, at some point, somebody's bound to be the next Al Capone, Pablo Escobar, or else 'El Chapo' Guzmán."

"More like Klaus Barbie," Halfrida chimed.

Francine snapped her fingers. "Precisely, and that's what my brothers have in mind. Rosy War was the war to start more wars." She laughed.

Damn, that's pretty awesome, Halfrida thought. "My mind is blown," she blurted.

"You know what we're talking about, don't you?" Francine pointed her finger at Lance. "Yes? No?"

"I don't know…," Lance replied.

"Yes or no," Francine stressed.

"Then yes," he answered.

Francine laughed.

Halfrida's eyes narrowed. *I'm starting to think she's pretty high on drugs right now.*

"So, consider my offer, Halfrida." Francine tilted her head at Halfrida. "Would the Ryanites be interested in me 'revising' the Kohler Act?"

"Well, I know two people in *Fame and Honor* who're interested in those arrangements," Halfrida said, referring to Walther Schäffer and Eddie Mack.

"What kind of revisions?" Lance voiced.

"A simple loophole that allows GACSS's Republic Program to continue reaping the benefits of its SSE," Francine elaborated. "Nobody will ask questions, once it passes through Capitol Hill. If President Wolff wins in November, everything will end smoothly for all of us."

"'All of us?'" Halfrida murmured. "Am I to assume Duchess Perpetua and the Western Commonwealth Jackbooters are in on this as well?"

"Maybe…" Francine giggled.

Was that a yes or a no? Halfrida shrugged her shoulders. "Never mind, I'll pretend I didn't ask that question." She scratched the back of her head.

Lance tilted his head to Halfrida, his hands still holding the opened briefcase. A drop of sweat rolled his forehead. "What's it going to be?"

Even though Perpetua is also in on this, what do I, my brother and cousins have to lose? Halfrida stroked her chin. She took a deep breath and exhaled. "Francine..., you've got yourself a deal."

"It's a pleasure to be doing business with you again." Francine smiled. She and Halfrida stood up from their chairs and shook each other's hands.

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(*Eight days later*)

The public schools began the new school year the day after Labor Day. The sky brightened as the sun began ascending over the houses and trees. Halfrida waited at the three-way road across the street from Lance's home, bored. She wore a bright-colored tank top, mid-length mini skirt and a pair of sandals. Her hair had been curled and applied perfume and makeup several minutes prior. Even before the afternoon, the humidity pervaded the air outside.

Lance leaned on the road sign pole, browsing *Catholic School Observer* on his phone. He sipped a small carton of apple juice through a bendy straw. Exiting out of the internet browser, he looked at the time. "Bus will be here any minute now, Halfrida," he told her.

"Thanks for letting me know, Lance." Halfrida giggled. "We better make sure Marcus McAlister gets his listening post established here." The humidity son got on her nerves. "But I swear: waiting for a school bus is *inhumane*!"

"That's God's way of repaying your cruelty, Halfrida." Lance snickered. "So Ryanites don't have school buses?"

"Lots of Catholic schools do," she replied. "Some schools own theirs, others, like the ones in the Philadelphia Archdiocese, rely on the local school districts."

"Damn!" Lance whistled. "That's literally no different than the ϟϟ siphoning scarce resources from the German army during World War II!"

"Just a coincidence," Halfrida reminded him.

The bus arrived to the three way road. Halfrida tilted her head to the left and pointed at it. "There it is." She tightened her grip around her handbag and straddled the backpack she carried. "You ready to go?"

Lance put his phone back in his pocket and grabbed the strap on his backpack from the ground between his feet. "Same here."

The bus, crowded as a train cattle car, opened its door. Halfrida and Lance climbed up the steps and settled in at an unoccupied seat. The bus driver closed the doors and proceeded to drive the bus out of the neighborhood. Chatter filled the air inside the bus. The other students never used their inside voices.

While in transit, Lance viewed his phone's instant messenger for text messages from other Jackbooters in his high school. The texts were being sent to a ridiculous collection of phone numbers. Each one began with 'TCHS', the letters stood 'Tracy Calhoun High School'.

Ladies and gents, today's special is two bags of beef jerky for two dollars, one message read. *Recommend a friend and get the next purchase half off! Hit me up at the senior lockers on second period.*

Another message followed. *Are you bored? Visit us the library on sixth period for quality literature and movies! Today is 'Horror House Tuesday, and Wednesday is 'Drama Wednesday.'*

Halfrida gazed at the incoming text messages. "The local Secret School Economy seems lively to me," she commented.

"Did you say something?" Lance whispered back.

She patted his shoulder and whispered into his ear. "I did."

"What was it?" Lance switched off his phone.

"It's about time we worked toward building that listening post." Halfrida winked. "And not too long ago, a few Lady Ostara sightings popped up. I'm going to spend the rest of the month looking into them. Can I trust you to build relations with the other Jackbooters?"

"What can they do for us?"

"Provide the listening post some camouflage; a cover, if you will."

"Okay, got any ideas on how we earn their cooperation?"

"Either buy their businesses or coerce them into working with us." Halfrida opened her handbag and showed Lance two items: a purse bloated with cash, and a loaded Cz75 Tactical Sports. "Whichever works best, I leave that to you."

"Put it in my locker. I'll do what I can." Lance switched his phone back on.

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Loud school bells sounded the beginning of fourth period at Tracy Calhoun High School. Students fled from their classes, filling the hallways with their numbers. In long columns, they strolled through crowded corridors on their way to the next class. Some students left their lockers and headed to the cafeteria with packed lunch from home.

After the crowds dispersed from the freshman halls, Lance looked over his shoulder while removing the padlock on his locker. Inside, Halfrida's handbag rested atop a shelf. Lance rummaged through numerous items to retrieve large sums of money from the purse. With the handbag still inside, he reinstalled the padlock on his locker, and walked away.

Someone in the school sent a text to him. "Meet me at the corner of Class 309. Be quick."

Lance responded, "I'm on my way." He put his phone away upon approaching a stairway. Upstairs, he strolled past the incoming students to meet his contact. Passing Class 309, Lance spotted a small dead-end path with lockers on his left.

A lone male student stood in straight posture with both hands inside his pockets. Lance walked up to the student, he and the Jackbooter looking over their shoulders for nosy onlookers.

"Hey there, Siegfried, the name's Pincushion." The Jackbooter shook his hand. "You're that new Jackbooter among the freshman, aren't you?"

"That's right," Lance replied. "I've been in the business for the past three years, so I'm no newbie." He smirked and blinked his eyes. "Glad to know see we're using our codenames."

"Standard procedure," Pincushion explained. "No two Jackbooters should know the other's identity. It helps to keep ourselves anonymous; there isn't supposed to be Secret School Economies."

"Pincushion, every school, regardless of which Great Power controls it, has a Jackbooter who coordinates and intercedes on the behalf of others. We call that guy the 'Foreman'. Independent ones, like this school, are the same thing."

"Then you came to the right person." Pincushion pounded a clenched fist against his chest. "What can I do for you?"

"I know someone who's interested in purchasing all the Jackbooter businesses in this school." Lance pointed his finger downward, at the floor. "She's willing to pay a lot of money to make it happen." He showed Pincushion the fat wad of cash. "Here, this is her offer."

Pincushion counted the money. "Not bad," he whistled, "Forty grand."

"Will that be enough to buy out everything?"

"For now." Pincushion smiled, sliding the money down his pocket. "Tell Marcus I'll have his listening post set up real soon."

Lance grinned. "Great, we'll let him know." He shook Pincushion's hand.

Across the hallway were the third floor men's and women's bathrooms. Inside the women's bathroom, Halfrida paced back and forth between two sinks and a wall behind them. She tightened her grip around the satphone, expecting a call from someone.

Her satphone began to vibrate and ring. She immediately answered it. "Yeah," Halfrida spoke into the phone, "I'm listening. Talk to me."

On the other end was Cousin Ulrich. "Heinricka and I have found a new lead on what Ostara's doing. It's huge and we don't know how long we'll be able to take advantage of this opening."

"Alright, then let's meet up at the usual place. See you then." Halfrida hung up. She turned right and approached Lance further down the hall.

Lance leaned his back against the wall. "You got a second?"

"Go for it." Halfrida nodded.

"Our friend is going to set up that listening post for Marcus," he said. "That should give us a chance to verify your suspicions about FYC expansion up here. Who knows, we might even be able to figure out where Lady Ostara is."

Halfrida crossed her arms. "You're pretty optimistic for a Caravaneer."

"That's because I am!" Lance chuckled.

J. N. ENRIQUEZ

Chapter Fourteen: Living Dangerously (Ryanite Chorus; Sept. 6th-Nov. 9th, 2012)

"Let them hate GACSS so long as they fear GACSS!"

-Heinricka Brotzman

Somewhere in the Dweller World, a drunken Halfrida and Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka were slouched around a formal dining table at a dining room inside a presidential hotel suite. The whole room was pitch-black, save for a strobing light suspended above the dining table. A fat compositional file folder lay in the middle of the table next to a bottle of Schnapps and burnt-out cigar in a stainless steel ashtray.

Halfrida raised her glass, ice cubes jingling on the walls and floating in a sea of the alcoholic beverage. "You mean my brother wanted me to look at this?" She downed the drink and settled the glass on the table. "And he learned about this from a girl working at the Avalon Hotel in Wonderland?"

"Well, he said he'd make it worth your while if you helped him out on whatever he was doing at Bedrock Mills," Heinricka said to her.

"I sure hope he, Margaret, and our godparents found something useful in that bank." Halfrida opened the front cover of the compositional file folder and skimmed through the stack of documents. The documents argued in favor of a strong case for a financial mechanism utilized by the Conspiracy. Some unsubstantiated reports about the Dweller Mob smuggling a designer drug on secret U-Boats throughout the planet.

The name of the drug caught her eye. "*Droge Acht* ('Drug Eight')," she muttered under her throat. "'D-VIII.'" Halfrida stroked her chin. "Where have I heard that name from?"

"That was something the Wolff Corporation developed on the behalf of our family's connections to IG Farben during World War II," Ulrich explained.

IDA MAFV treads rolled along the road above their heads. Hundreds of pairs of jackboots romped like in a military parade. The Dwellers always built their subterranean equivalent to skyscrapers by burrowing all the floors into the ground, hence the name 'groundscrapers'.

Everyone froze. Heads tilted upward at the ceiling, they waited until the movements subsided. When the stomping ended, Heinricka spoke. "Wasn't IG Farben dismantled during the Nuremburg trials?"

"Nein, IG Farben's liquidation process began in 1952," Ulrich reported. "It's scheduled to be completed this year, on 31 October!"

October 31, 2012? Halfrida pondered to herself. "Go figure."

"*Oh Mein Gott*!" Heinricka shuddered in terror. She was a tipsy and struggled to count with her fingers. "How long did that take?"

"Sixty years," he answered.

"*Heilige Scheiße*!" Heinricka fainted and passed out, slamming her forehead against the table, splashing her glass of Schnapps over her hair.

Ulrich sighed. "Was I supposed to lie or something?"

Halfrida giggled. "She'd just drank a few glasses too many."

"What was that?" Ulrich cocked his head to the side.

"Not everyone on Earth can stomach the reality that there are fanatical Nazis, Fascists, Communists, Monarchists, Traditional Catholics, Christian Fundamentalists, Liberals, Conservatives, Green Parties, Libertarians, Anarchists, and lots of other people hiding behind every Bush."

"And that's 'bush' with a lower case 'b', not, you know, the Bush family?"

"Okay." Halfrida nodded. She snickered, unable to conceal her laughter.

"There's nothing funny about this," Ulrich told her. "We're talking about the infamous corporation that manufactured Zyklon B!"

"A better question we need to address is why it took so long to liquidate IG Farben and all of its assets," she said.

Ulrich pointed his finger at her. "Do you know?"

"I think the answer lies in how we bypassed the Rosy War Peace Treaty's restrictions on armaments." She grinned. "You got to love runaway corporatism, Cousin: you can use corporate cartels to run secret weapons programs in rogue states! President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' in physical form!"

"Watch out, America," he warned. "North Korea is not your enemy! Those crazy Frenchmen running amok in Paris will launch the German-made nukes at your cities if they feel like it!"

Halfrida and Ulrich laughed at the insane thought of a real-life *Dr. Strangelove*. The cousins fantasized about a map of Europe. In it, Germany, armed with nukes, blackmailed the Soviet Union before it collapsed. Result: Czechoslovakia split into Czech Republic and Slovakia. Yugoslavia shattered into Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, and Kosovo. Hungary, Poland, and Russia gobbled up the Ukraine.

"Uh, isn't that the bilateral Rapallo Treaty of 1922?" Ulrich leaned his head to the side against the palm of his hand, his elbow planted on the table.

"Yep," Halfrida giggled. "Why do you think West Germany pursued its nuclear weapons program in countries like Brazil, South Africa, and Israel?" She continued browsing through more pages of typewritten pages, setting them aside in a separate stack behind the ashtray. Each of these pages had a glossy Polaroid photograph attached to them with either a paperclip or a single staple.

"There's been lots of talk these days about Iran's nuclear program." Ulrich hiccupped. "I have a feeling that America should not mess with that country unless it wants to anger the *Vaterland*."

"I know." Halfrida's speech slurred. "Germany and Iran have been BFFs since the days of the Kaiser, like the 1890s or something." She straightened the new pile of papers she made. "But back to IG Farben, back to IG Farben." She sneezed at Heinricka. "The reason it took so long was because that corporation made way too many patent and technology exchanges with too many countries. You literally needed an army of lawyers, paralegals, accounts, and financial advisors to sort through it all."

"Then going by your logic," Ulrich wondered, "Why does that leave us?"

"Finding and tracking down the money trail of Lady Ostara should be my first priority," she replied. "In the meantime, I need you and Cousin Heinricka to do me a favor."

"What's the favor?" Ulrich spoke.

"Go to Lower Manhattan and take a hike to the corporate headquarters of Cross Financial Unlimited." Halfrida got up from her chair and stretched her arms. "Victor Gordon has some matter that needs to be dealt with."

"You know I hate being groped and molested by TSA men with big, strong arms!" Ulrich grumbled. "The DHS should just leave me the Hell alone!" He blacked out and slumped over his chair.

"How are we supposed to fight the War on Terror with BS like that?" Halfrida followed suit. "…*Gute*…*Nacht*…" She dozed off.

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(*Ten days later*)

Dark clouds loomed over the Lower Manhattan skyline after midnight, blotting out the Moon and the twinkling stars. Vast canyons of concrete, steel, neon, and glass decorated the whole area. A strong wind blew from the east, swaying a few buildings, testing the ingenuity and prowess of American engineering.

Thunder rumbled. Twin lightning bolts flashed overhead. Heavy rain showered everyone wandering the streets, trying to get home from after socializing with friends or extended family. Crowds of pedestrians carried umbrellas, cars along the roads splashing them with puddles of water.

At the World Financial Center in Lower Manhattan stood 3 World Financial Center, the 'Cross Financial Unlimited Building', the US headquarters for Cross Financial Unlimited. The building oversaw the central financial clearinghouses for every SSE the Ryanites and Underground controlled. Even in broad daylight, both sides never entered through the main entrance. They entered through a special 24-hour accessway that CFU surreptitiously added in the wake of 9/11.

Somewhere in the ground floor area, past the front lobby, stood a well-lit elevator lobby made of fine slabs of Venetian marble. A door led down a stairwell to a backup generator room in the subbasement. Always locked from the inside, the backup generator room contained another elevator. Anyone pushing all the right buttons on the control panel and inserting a keycard into a slot was taken down to a neutral Dweller city over a dozen miles beneath New York.

Back upstairs, the stairwell door opened. Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka, peeking around the doorway, stepped into the elevator lobby. A pair of glass doors on their left went straight back to the front lobby. In front of them was a sleek and sexy ThyssenKrupp elevator. Ulrich whistled at that fine piece of German engineering. Heinricka pushed the button on the panel next to the doors.

The doors opened. The cousins stepped into the elevators, the doors closed behind them. A keycard slot was nested on a stainless-steel panel of buttons for

both upper and lower floors. It included everything from 'Basement Sublevel 5', to 'Ground Floor', and 'Floor 51'.

The elevator remained idle, waiting for the cousins to insert a keycard into the slot. *Why did we not get a proper keycard from Halfrida?* Ulrich sighed, gesturing at the keycard slot. "Look."

Heinricka shrugged her shoulders. "Why bother with that thing?" She pushed all of the buttons on the panel in a certain order. She jumped up and down. "Food court!" Heinricka cried, landing on both feet and clapping her hands.

You seriously think that's going to work? Ulrich tilted his chin down and shook his head. Slowly, much to his chagrin, the elevator ascended. *This isn't funny!*

On a glass window, the cousins spotted the dark shadow of a tall building under construction, not far from the World Financial Center. It was the former grounds of the World Trade Center. Tall cranes towered over the highest completed floors of the structure. Bluish twin lightning bolts blitzed overhead.

Heinricka peered through the window, her hands and body pressed against the window. "I think that's the new World Trade Center."

"*Ich sehe* ('I see')…" Ulrich tilted his chin, eyes staring at the floor. *Harold and Halfrida, may the Lord continue to bless you, just as He did on that terrible day.* He made the sign of the cross, clasped his hands, and whispered a short prayer on their behalf.

Heinricka turned to Ulrich as he made the sign of the cross again. "Anyway, what were we talking about on the way here?"

That should be easy. He snapped his fingers. "Ask any Jackbooter–Lance, for instance–and they'll tell you that there's only one SSE in the entire New York Metropolitan Area." Ulrich leaned his back against a glass window overlooking the front entrance. "That's why Underground and RGA troops are forbidden from attacking this area or its counterparts: Dweller World's 'New Europe' and Otherworld's 'Other-New York.'"

"Ja, but I find it odd that Underground guards Other-New York."

"Oh, they're just there for security," he scoffed.

"And the reason for New York having one SSE is…*was*?"

"This whole city, minus Brooklyn, is part of the Archdiocese of New York."

"I never understood why the Church made Brooklyn a separate Diocese."

"Back in the days of St. John Neumann, Brooklyn was considered a separate city independent of New York," he clarified. "If you go further east to Nassau and Suffolk counties along that peninsula, you'll be knocking on Duchess Perpetua and her cousins' 'official' doorstep: the 'Diocese of Rockville Centre.'"

"Perpetua has cousins nearby?"

Ulrich nodded. "Harold and Halfrida's side of the family, the Raynersons, the Bauers, Wolffs, McAdams, and Cardingtons all came to this country through Ellis Island." He crossed his arms.

Heinricka shrugged her shoulders. "That sounds like a clever excuse from the House of Raynerson to not let us end the war sooner. Why go after their colonies, when you can strike at their capital, Other-Boston?"

"There are certain treaties that still need to abided," he reminded her. "Remember, Underground, Remnants, Dwellers, and Ryanites aren't the only players on the Grand Chessboard."

"Now that you mentioned it…" Heinricka paused. "New York's Manhattan was where the Ryanite Prosperity Sphere created one of the world's first SSEs. The first 'State Chancellor' of the RPS was…?"

He blurted: "Howard Wolff." Ulrich smirked. "*Lustig* ('funny'), isn't it?"

"*Natürlich*," she agreed. "And that brings us to Victor Gordon?"

"That brings us to Victor Gordon."

The elevator came to a complete halt on the 50th floor. The doors opened to reveal a well-lit marble elevator lobby devoid of life. Ulrich and Heinricka stepped out of the elevator. They strolled into an adjacent hallway and entered a conference boardroom opposite of the elevator lobby.

Standing by the doorway with the door left wide open, Ulrich held the door for her. "Danke," Heinricka winked.

"*Bitte schön*." Ulrich went in after, the door closing itself.

Inside, the boardroom was spacious and bright. A conference table stretched across the room. A large window formed the wall on the other side of the room. Victor Gordon hovered in front of the window, still dressed in his school uniform, his hands behind his back. "Hmph." He chuckled. "Glad you two could make it."

The cousins stared at him with blank faces. Something was off about Victor.

"Why are you two still standing there?" Victor motioned them to have a seat at one of the chairs at the conference table. "We've got diplomatic work to do."

"You've lost some weight since I last saw you," Ulrich voiced.

"I did," Victor admitted. "But that's not the reason why you're here, Ulrich."

Heinricka settled for one of the chair in front of the doorway. Ulrich sat in the chair next to hers.

Victor plopped on the chair in front of the cousins. "As you both know, your Cousins, specifically State Chancellor Harold Brotzman, had asked me to go on a globetrotting quest around the Catholic world."

"A devout pilgrimage to the Holy Land?" Heinricka mused.

"Not quite," Victor responded. "I'm talking about every Catholic school system except the Greater American Catholic School System."

"Have any expressed interest in supporting our cause?" Ulrich asked.

"None of their student leaders are willing or prepared to challenge Underground hegemony in the Otherworld, let alone their alliances in the Dweller World." Victor grimaced. "GACSS is going to need all the help it can get if we're going to fight a two-front war against the Underground and the Conspiracy."

Ulrich nodded. "*Genau*."

"Even so, there are other diplomatic matters that neither Harold nor Halfrida have been able to address." Victor rolled his eyes upward at the ceiling, trying to think. "What international order are you and those twins seeking to impose, assuming you win Brotzmanskrieg?"

"We want to restore the former glory of American Catholic Education," Ulrich answered. "Decades ago, after the Second World War, we Ryanites achieved an empire that wielded the largest non-government school system in America."

"But those days are long gone, cousin," Heinricka questioned. "The America of the 1950s is nothing like the America we know today."

"She's right, Ulrich." Victor gestured at Heinricka. "The Catholic world is more than just the United States. A lot of the foreign markets that GACSS wants are still in the Catholic world."

Ulrich stroked his chin. "And what is your point?"

"Have any of you Brotzmans considered a New World Order for every Catholic school system to emulate?" Victor pondered.

"*Nein*." Ulrich shook his head. "It never occurred to us. We felt that all we needed to do was to paint a friendly face to offset the aggressive side of things."

"That's not the way most youths in the Catholic world look at this conflict." Victor paused for a few seconds.

Heinricka's eyebrows rose. "How do they perceive our fight against the Underground?"

"They think of us, GACSS, as the counterbalance against the secularization of this nation and theirs," Victor said. "It's been almost fifty years since the end of Vatican II. In the years since then, the Church has witnessed a steady decline in its influence over the youth. More young Catholics today abandon the faith now than they did prior to the Sixties."

"And they believe we're the counterbalance they want most?" Ulrich asked.

Victor nodded. "Yes. With Howard Wolff guaranteed to become the next President, the time is right for both us and Underground to consider creating a Catholic New World Order after Brotzmanskrieg."

He continued. "And the reason why we're here tonight is figuring out what kind of platform should GACSS present itself as."

"What are our options?" Heinricka spoke.

Thunder roared outside the building. The ceiling lights flickered and faded for a few seconds before coming back on. "There are three possible options available to us." Victor held up one finger. "We could take a hardline approach, which will solidify our image in the eyes of the Church and appear antagonistic to the secular world."

Another finger went up. "We could take a sane and balanced approach," Victor said before holding up a third. "Or, we could soften our image to the secular world and risk losing the trust and loyalty of our base."

That's a tough one, Ulrich thought. "What are the risks of ignoring this?"

"We risk not taking advantage of potential diplomatic arrangements that Harold and Halfrida would like to use to further GACSS' interests." Victor relaxed his hands on the table.

"'*Oderint*, *dum metuant*!'" Heinricka declared, quoting the Roman Emperor Caligula. "Let them hate GACSS so long as they fear GACSS!"

"But why, Cousin, why?" Ulrich questioned.

"*Es gibt nur zwei auswählen* ('There are only two choices to choose from.')," she stressed. "'Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.'"

"Well played." Victor nodded. "It is better for us to be hated by the world by being Catholic *Jugend* instead of being loved by it."

You're right, now that I think about it. Ulrich chuckled. "I believe a hardline choice is necessary, Victor. The rest of humanity needs to wake up and learn that we Ryanites are also at war with the world. How are we supposed to fight the War on Terror if everyone in America wants to kill us for being Roman Catholics?"

***

(*One month later*)

Syosset, a sleepy hamlet in Staten Island's Nassau County, remained untouched by the bombings. At Sacred Heart Academy, an all-girl K-12 Catholic school, it was business as usual. The sisters, veterans of the Rosy War, ran extracurricular activities on school grounds for *Christus Rex's* elite Little Flower Battalion. Duchess Perpetua, the battalion commander, held an afterschool wargame with its all-boy counterpart, the *Regina Coeli* (Queen of Heaven) Battalion.

At a windowsill inside the school's fourth floor observatory, she pulled open a window. A white lily flower hairpin nested in her ash blonde hair. With a radio handset and a pair of binoculars wrapped around her neck, she searched for her battalion's MAFVs. *Where is my battalion, I wonder?* Chuckling, she sniffed a few fumes of gasoline. "This'll be good."

Platoons of *Regina Coeli* MAFVs rolled into the lacrosse field from the adjacent all-boy school. Most of them drove captured Ryanite MAFVs, their chassis repainted in *Christus Rex* livery. They proceeded in a standard RGA formation, forming the shape of an arrowhead. Perpetua studied the MAFVs.

Most of the captured MAFVs were Maurice II/E1s, Medium MAFVs patterned after the German Panzer IV/F1 model. Each had a coaxial turret sporting a stubby howitzer and laser machine gun and another machine gun built into the hull beside the driver's view port.

The opposing battalion commander had a Maurice II/E2, based on the Panzer IV/F2. His MAFV, the chassis covered in fallen autumn leaves, bore a longer barrel that set it apart from the rest.

Weak winds blew autumn leaves away from nearby trees. Dead leaves floated in the air like gold confetti over piles of leaves littering the lacrosse field. Without warning, four hundred diesel engines rumbled. Smoke poured out of the piles. Platoons of Vladimir I/As, diesel-guzzling Heavy MAFVs modelled after Soviet KV-1/As, emerged from the piles. Their crews camouflaged them in leaves, mud, twigs, tall grass, and blobs of paint.

The two battalions battled each other with plasma training rounds. The training rounds bounced on their armored hulls, sending a computerized logic bomb to shut down its onboard electronics. One hit, one knocked-out MAFV. Some girls crashed their Vladimirs into their armored opponents, disorienting the

crews and knocking their MAFVs off balance. The drivers on those Vladimirs backed away from the Maurices at high speed, giving their gunners an opening to fire a fast shot and finish them off.

An acorn fell from a tree and landed on the hatch atop one of the Vladimir's turrets. A squirrel scurried out of the same tree to get it. One of the girls blurted something over the Battalion's radios. "No, we can't be breaking up!" The driver of one Vladimir, texting her boyfriend, ran over the squirrel. Revving up the rear engine, she crushed it and the acorn beneath the MAFV's big, wide treads before crashing into another Vladimir.

Her commander reported the dead squirrel. "Oh hey, a free meal," she said.

Don't text and drive, ladies! Perpetua giggled and turned away from the window.

Footsteps echoed outside the school observatory. The door behind Perpetua sprang open. A brunette girl wearing a white maiden tiara hovered at the doorway, panting. In her hands was a folded communiqué from Underground Central Command, back home in the Imperial Palace.

Perpetua crossed her arms, eyes closed, chin tilted down, and her head shook. "What is it?" she sighed.

It was her personal maid and driver, Baroness Felicity Raynerson. "Bad…news…" She wiped the sweat from her brow and slammed the door shut.

"Don't tell me Fake News and her sisters, Real News and Good News, are snooping around the school building again." Perpetua placed her hand over her forehead. "I thought we paid her enough money to look the other way."

"No, it's got nothing to do with that at all." Felicity strutted up to her offered the communiqué. "See for yourself."

She took the communiqué from her and unfolded it. "Mother of God, please help," Perpetua murmured, making the sign of the cross.

The communiqué reported on a recent major battle in the Otherworld. RGA 6th Army scored major victories against entrenched Underground regulars in the Battle of Other-Washington DC. The Ryanites performed a pincer strike against the Underground 58th and 71st Armies, encircling and destroying over 250,000 personnel within weeks.

Well, look at we have here… Perpetua narrowed her eyes and resumed reading. Little Flower and *Regina Coeli* had been asked by Underground Central Command to participate in a major operation against the fascist Ryanites.

"When are we moving out?"

Perpetua glared at her, arms crossed, still holding the document. She responded with what her aristocratic namesake, St. Perpetua, once said. "'I shall tell you tomorrow.'"

Felicity, aware of the hidden context, bowed her head. "I will be waiting until the day we are called to the front…, cousin."

"Dismissed!" she gestured at the door.

Twirling away from Perpetua on her heels, Felicity marched away.

***

(*Twenty six days later*)

Fake News received a special task from not just the Brotzman cousins, but also the House of Raynerson for *Peace Through Strength!* in the 9 November episode. On the anniversary of German reunification, or worse, *Kristallnacht*, the Republican and Democratic Washington elites lost their collective sanity. Psychiatrists on Fox News called it 'Brotzman Derangement Syndrome'.

TV static appeared onscreen. Archive C-SPAN footage showed Congresswoman Virginia Reich (D-VA) holding a public eulogy at an upscale hotel banquet not far from the Capitol steps. A large portrait of this young woman was mounted on an easel beside the Congresswoman.

The eulogy was held for an ϟϟ concentration camp commandant's neo-Nazi granddaughter, who later joined the Conspiracy as a suicide bomber. The granddaughter was a spoiled teenage girl named Cinderella Wittmann. The portrait showed Cinderella with her right hand raised above her shoulders, a Swastika armband wrapped around her other arm. In the background, a Nazi battle flag fluttered against clear blue skies.

"President-elect Wolff is such a horrible, wicked, evil man!" the Congresswoman declared before a podium. "How could he say such things and do such things to all those inhumane and bloodthirsty Waffen-ϟϟ veterans? After all, they're superhuman beings!" She broke down and sobbed.

Republican Ryanite voters attending the banquet laughed at her, their Democratic counterparts booing. "Did you your medication today, Congresswoman?" Halfrida's voice called out in the background.

"No, Ms. Brotzman," the Congresswoman answered.

The TV static returned for a few seconds. It subsided, showing some grainy archive C-SPAN footage–this time, from the GOP. An emergency session of Congress was called by the Senate. Republican senators plotted to impeach the President-elect for colluding with the Prussians, not the Russians. The TV static came back. The whole screen was blurred out and voices altered to the point of becoming indecipherable.

A new black-and-white slide appeared. Ominous piano music from a corny 1980s horror movie played. *Night of the Long Knives*, it read. "'It can't happen here', the Communist pundits on MSNBC claimed last year," Fake News snorted. "But guess what, America? It did happen!"

She laughed as a map of the United States appeared onscreen. All of the fifty states were shown in a uniform shade of dark red. There had been a unanimous decision among most Americans to vote for Howard Wolff. "Like, OMG, American ultranationalist Howard Wolff has been 'elected' as the 45th President of the United States!" Fake News cooed. "Yay, we did, we did it, guys! America is finally a true Roman Catholic country now!"

Archive footage of election night showed Howard Wolff addressing a crowd of radical Catholic youths, gun-toting paramilitaries, senior citizens, and illegal immigrants with rocket launchers at a convention center in Manhattan.

"My fellow Catholic Americans, I am very grateful to our one true God that I have been elected as your President," Howard Wolff said. "As for all the anti-

Americans who didn't vote for me, I hope you all enjoy your luxurious vacation at Guantanamo Bay!"

Crowds of youths grew rowdy. Great-grandparents and great-grandchildren alike fired their handguns and submachine guns at a glass ceiling, shattering it into a thousand pieces of large shards. Umbrellas blossomed, shielding everyone from the falling shards.

"But first of all…" Holding up his right hand, his index finger went up. "To the feminist bitches threatening to rape and deport my wife: get your freaking abortions now!" Howard Wolff shouted, his hands placed on the podium. "The Supreme Court and I are going to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, plus same-sex marriage, and you're all going to like it!"

Rockets soared upward into the dark night above. They exploded in shades of red, white, and blue, just like fireworks on the 4th of July.

"Now, I want to thank the Democrats for helping me rig the unguarded electronic voting machines and blaming the Russians!" he continued. "President Obama, God bless you for passing House Resolution (HR) 2647. Rejoice America, because he spent over $1,000,000,000,000 of your taxpayer money for our thermonuclear arsenal!"

The statement was juxtaposed with archival footage of *hijacked* Russian and American nuclear ICBMs in midflight over the Atlantic during the Harrisburg Incident. A large fleet of Ryanite twin-engine A-Wings chased after them in two separate formations, shooting them all down before they could reach their targets. The A-Wings flew through exploding ICBMs unscathed, their fuselages releasing harmless Anomaly-made chemical solutions that negated the radioactive effects.

The Ryanites in the audience showered him with a barrage of cheerful applause. Wolff guzzled on a bottle of Schnapps before continuing. "When I was a boy growing up, I witnessed Truman dropping two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And it got me thinking: 'I should run for President and drop some hydrogen bombs at a random country somewhere!'"

"Bomb Poland!" one group of Ryanites pleaded.

"Bomb Russia!" a second group begged.

"Bomb Poland with Russia!" a third cried.

The audience cheered him on.

Somebody tossed a hand grenade at President-elect Wolff. The grenade landed on the podium. Wolff brushed it aside in a casual manner. It detonated not far from where he stood.

"As I was saying…," he said.

Gunshots interrupted Wolff. He pulled out a Smith & Wesson 500 Magnum revolver and ducked under the podium, poking his head over it. Sounds of people tackling someone followed. "*Heil Hitler!*" a teenage girl wailed, seconds before an explosion. People screamed and ran out of the building in a panic. The camera was knocked off its tripod, the screen fading to black.

J. N. ENRIQUEZ

Chapter Fifteen: Never Forget, Pt. II (Ryanite Chorus; Nov. 9-Dec. 9, 2012)

"Something happened here at this museum in Other-Peoria. What are people trying to hide?"
-Fake News

Anomalies racked in massive fortunes to finance the ideological goals of Brotzmanskrieg's three major factions. Both GACSS and Underground sought to use the profits to further their opposing visions of Catholic Education for the Catholic world. Meanwhile, the Ostara Conspiracy camouflaged its existence and goals behind a triple-layered veil of ignorance, secrecy, and biased conspiracy theories.

A fierce rainstorm assaulted Philadelphia and its surrounding suburbs afterschool on 9 November. Gray clouds blotted out the waning sun and the darkening skies above. Twin lightning bolts flashed. Thunder rumbled. In South Philly, at Ss. John Neumann and Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic High School, the campus was almost devoid of students and teachers. The parking lot lay bare. Afterschool sports and clubs canceled.

Inside, ceiling lights flickered as the school's emergency back-up generators restored power. Sounds of rocks being crushed echoed throughout the dreary halls. Jackbooted Civil Guards patrolled in squads of ten, a loaded Luger holstered to their hips.

For 'Neumann-Seton', like most schools under the shadow of the Republic Program, two student-led 'parties' dictated the affairs of Plaidstadt: the Social Democratic 'Dove Lobby' and the Christian Democratic 'Hawk Lobby'. Lesser parties also existed, one of which began behind closed doors at Neumann-Seton. A classroom had a black placard bearing the numbers '318' in gold.

Cousin Ulrich presided behind a podium in the front of the room, still dressed in a St. Maria Goretti uniform. The Ryanite ensign decorated in plaid was mounted beside him on an oak wood flagpole. It was the *Plaidfahne*, the ceremonial banner commemorating the Rebirth of Catholic Education.

In the student desks sat Cousins Halfrida and Heinricka, Republic Representative Anthony Accardo, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Francis Leblanc, Victor Gordon, Chandler Daniel Martinsen, Marcus McAlister, Drusilla Price, Eddie Mack, and Lance Jansen. Everyone except Lance was dressed in uniforms of their respective Catholic schools.

Ulrich straightened his necktie. "Thank you, everyone, for taking the time to help me form the CIF (Catholic Identity First)." Smiling, Ulrich paid a brief glance at an official stationary from Cousin Harold. "I just got a letter from Harold at Plaidstadt, congratulating us for our recent achievement."

Everyone clapped. Chandler, Marcus, Nathaniel, and Francis cheered him on. Thunder roared outside the school. The lights flickered for a few seconds. Darkness and silence engulfed the room before the lights came back on. Ulrich turned away from the others and grabbed a black marker from his pocket. On the

board was 'CIF AGENDA' in big letters. He crossed it out with the marker. "History repeats itself in more ways than one."

He lectured the others. "It tends to lay dormant and return under a new name at some point in the future." He pressed his index finger against a table in front of him. "The Conspiracy isn't any different from GACSS or Underground."

"Conspiracy theories aren't my thing," Lance voiced.

"Me too," Francis agreed.

"Just because you're paranoid, that doesn't mean someone's out to get you," Nathaniel warned the two boys, eyes darting all over the room. "In our line of work, there's always someone who's dissatisfied with us."

"Like who?" Heinricka, seated behind Lance and Victor, asked.

"Name me one person in Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Wall Street, Washington, and so forth who appreciates GACSS," Nathaniel quipped. "If you can't name any, don't bother." He turned his head away from her and the boys.

Chandler fidgeted in his chair. "You were saying, Ulrich?"

"People, there is no grand-unified conspiracy theory," Ulrich stressed. "They never take you anywhere but endless circles around brick walls."

"They also make great propaganda hit-pieces to demonize certain governments," Victor hollered. "Does anyone remember when Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that most people believed Washington orchestrated the 9/11 attacks?" He sulked in disgust.

"Yup," Drusilla replied, nodding her head. "And yet some people still insist that 9/11 was an 'American Reichstag Fire.'"

"More like an 'American 11/9'–*Kristallnacht*," Marcus added.

Anthony scratched his scalp. "The real question in the back of my mind is whether a certain family starting with the letter 'b' had a hand in it."

"Bush?" Drusilla rolled her eyes.

"Bin Laden?" Lance guessed.

"Brotzman," Nathaniel declared.

"Ding-ding-ding!" Anthony pointed his fingers at Nathaniel. "We've got the Brotzmans attending terrorist conferences in the 1960s and 1970s. A Brotzman family acquaintance bankrolled the Ayatollah Khomeini and, at one point, Osama bin Laden. President Bush, not long after 9/11, investigated Swiss bank accounts connected to the Brotzman family, yet the Brotzmans were steps ahead of the government." He laughed. "They cooked the freaking books!"

Halfrida banged her desk with clenched fists. "Dammit, I didn't come here to have an ice cream social about the skeletons inside my family's closet!"

"If there's any hope for RGA High Command to take the Ostara Conspiracy seriously," Heinricka said to her, "We must share our family history now, Cousin."

"So how should we look at this?" Anthony slouched in his chair, kicking up his hobnailed jackboots on the desk in front of his. He rested his hands against the back of his head.

"Yeah, where do we begin, Ulrich?" Eddie Mack chimed.

Ulrich cleared his throat. "ϟϟ *Obersturmbannführer* Horst Brotzman is an Aryan Don Corleone with nothing to lose. He and others made plans for the reestablishment of the old Greater German Reich."

"Again, we're asking you to rewind that tape," Halfrida said. "What happened before that? How does that stuff have to do with what's going on right now?"

"What do you mean?" Ulrich cocked his head to the side.

Halfrida rolled her eyes. "If we can't understand the past, how are we supposed to understand the present? And if can't understand the present, how can we build a better future? My brother is counting on us to go after the Conspiracy as well as the Underground."

Ulrich spent the next several minutes in silence. Stroking his chin, he paced back and forth around the room with the clipboard in his hands. Everything came together. He returned to the front of the room and presided behind the podium. "To begin, we have to go back to 1932." He picked up a black marker and chiseled '1932' on the board.

"Your grandpa seems to have hatred in his heart," Drusilla spoke. "Why?"

"*Nein*, contrary to popular belief, my Opa and his brothers were never driven by 'hate.'" Ulrich paused and stared at the tiled floor. "They were driven by a misguided love of race and nation." He straightened his posture and eyed the others. "They believed Communism and Capitalism represented two sides of a Judeo-Masonic Shekel. A 'Third Position' against both Communism and Capitalism was necessary."

He turned around and scrawled '*Motive: Third Reich = Third Position*' on the marker board. "That brings us to my Opa shaking Hitler's hand one day."

"No way," Chandler shouted. "For real?"

"Jawohl." Ulrich motioned Heinricka to step up to the board.

Heinricka nodded. She got up and taped an authenticated photograph of an early teenage Horst Brotzman shaking the hand of Adolf Hitler at an NSDAP rally in 1932. Horst's brothers Arno and Sebastian stood beside him. Both Arno and Sebastian were one and two years younger than Horst respectively. Sebastian in particular was the grandfather of Harold and Halfrida Brotzman.

"Is it true that the Brotzman family were major players in Germany's armaments industry?" Nathaniel asked the cousins.

"Yes, and we did it for the money," Halfrida replied before her cousins could. "We also ran an elite boarding school in what's now the Czech Republic."

"NPEA Rakonitz," Nathaniel interjected.

"Uh-huh." Halfrida nodded. "But that school was apparently a cover for covert research into the precursor to our Teleportation Transponders – the *N-Gerät*, or 'Norn Device.'"

"Ah, I think I've heard of this," Francis said. "Didn't they use that Device to escape to the Otherworld in 1945?"

"Right," Halfrida answered, "And that's why we call them 'Remnants', because they once called themselves the *HJ-Reste*, 'Hitler Youth Remnants.'"

"Well, there goes the Remnants side of the equation," Eddie said. "What about the Underground and the rest?"

"The Brotzman family has done business in this country as far back as the Civil War," Anthony elaborated. "During the Third Reich years, they coordinated with descendants of those connections in the Raynerson-Nazi Affair. It was around that time that the seeds of GACSS and Underground were sown."

"How so?" Drusilla stretched her arms.

"Both GACSS and Underground are the children of the old Ryanite Prosperity Sphere (RPS)," Anthony clarified. "Are we missing anything, Ulrich?"

"We are missing one thing." Ulrich wrote 'Horst's post-World War II activities' on the board. "Much of my Opa's history remains a mystery. There'd been accusations of him supporting various terrorist groups, but they're just rumors. I'm asking everyone here to pitch in and help unravel the mysteries in our 'novel full of realities.'"

"And figure out where how it affects the present…," Halfrida blurted.

"What was that, Cousin?" Heinricka called out to her.

"Nothing," Halfrida answered.

"What do we know about the Conspiracy?" Chandler asked Ulrich.

"So far, all we know is their activities," Marcus whispered in Chandler's ear.

"The Conspiracy specializes in the smuggling of narcotics, arms, and personnel across international borders." Ulrich held up his index finger. "But that's not all…" He tilted his head down at the clipboard in his hands and paced back and forth across the room. "…industrial-scale counterfeiting, financial fraud, insider trading, currency manipulation, political infiltration, blackmail, kidnapping, theft of artworks and national treasures, contract killing, cyberterrorism, and corporate espionage."

"What a huge rap sheet," whistled Francis.

"It is, isn't it, Leblanc?" Ulrich responded.

"Makes you wonder why they need trillions of dollars," Anthony mused.

Ulrich snapped his fingers and pointed at Anthony. "I'm glad you pointed that out, Accardo, because it's one of the biggest mysteries surrounding my Opa. With that kind of money and the right people, you could pursue research projects that are science fiction." He taped a black-and-white printout of a hovering flying disc next to the old photo. "One has to assume if these mysterious A-Wings were funded with dirty money."

"Sounds like we've got an idea on where to begin," Halfrida grinned.

"Where should we begin, anyway?" Chandler rested his head against his desk.

"We go after the Dweller Mob, probe its connections to the Independent Dweller Party (IDP) and Lady Ostara." Halfrida crossed her arms. "For now, let's bring this to the attention of High Command."

"I've always wanted to go to Castle Blackstone," Heinricka spoke.

Anthony laughed, smiling. "Blackstone's the most disinteresting place in the world, Heinricka."

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J. N. ENRIQUEZ

(*One month later*)

The hot Otherworld sun hung high over clear blue skies. Summer came to Eden, to Other-Peoria, in December. Anomaly Causing Phenomena (ACP) clusters dotted the city and surrounding fields of arable land. Warning signs and barbed wire fences warded both sides away.

The Little Flower Battalion stopped by the roadside near a large billboard. Hundreds of St. Vladimir I MAFVs, Studebaker trucks, and fully-enclosed halftracks pulled over to enjoy their breakfast. Girls took selfies and group selfies in front of the billboard with their smartphones. The billboard had an advertisement from AT&T back in 2008. *AT&T works in more places, like NSA Headquarters*, the advertisement read. Somebody from that company forgot to change the billboard, but that no longer mattered when Underground and GACSS found themselves at war.

A squadron of eight Underground St. Faustina Fa-38B fighter-bombers soared overhead, propellers screaming. Gunfire and the occasional explosion echoed in the distance. Sounds of rolling MAFVs, trucks, and halftracks roared from a nearby road.

Cooking oil fizzled on the roof of a bulky coaxial turret atop an idle Christus Rex Vladimir I/C, the latest model of the Underground's Vladimir I series. Beside the slathered layer of cooking oil was the commander's cupola turret. Several egg yolks plummeted into the cooking oil.

A girl with a spatula scrambled the eggs as they sizzled under the sun. Brown curled hair, a silver monocle over her left eye, and braces, she appeared to be around Drusilla Price's age. "Your Highness," she called out to Duchess Perpetua, "Do you want your eggs scrambled or rolled up like an omelet?"

"Make them like an omelet, Countess Cecilia," Perpetua hollered, sitting in a foldable lawn chair underneath a beach umbrella, reading a newspaper, her legs crossed. "Well, well, what do we have here?" Perpetua's eyes narrowed. The newspaper, *Other-Boston Daily*, reported on some stimulating news back in the United States.

FBI added a deceased individual named 'Sharon Lockhart' to their most wanted terrorists list, the communiqué read. *The FBI Director reported to Congress that over a $1,000,000,000 of its budget was missing. Worse, unknown hackers broke into the FBI's government servers and downloaded over a dozen terabytes of data to an unknown location.*

Perpetua shook her head, grabbed a lighter from her satchel, and held the communiqué over an open flame. *You never cease to amaze me with your insanity, Halfrida*, she swore to herself, setting aside the folded newspaper on her lap. She observed her cousins, Countess Cecilia, Baroness Felicity, and Princess Philomena.

Countess Cecilia, the girl with the spatula, sliced and diced slabs of sausage, bacon, mushrooms, peppers, and jalapeños at the cousins' Vladimir I/C Heavy MAFV, the *Four Horsemen*. *Four Horsemen* was parked into a ditch dug across from a roadside, piles of topsoil buried up to the turret's front gun mantlet.

Baroness Felicity sat on an empty wooden crate in front of the parked MAFV. Inserting a brush in and out of the barrel of an unloaded Soviet PPSH-41

submachine gun, she hummed the melody of 'God Save the Queen' from the Sex Pistols as she cleaned it.

Princess Philomena waved her royal handheld fan back-and-forth to keep herself cool. Its spokes made of solid stainless steel and aluminum, the fan was a military-grade Japanese war fan, a self-defense weapon used in martial arts. "Do you have a second, Baroness Felicity?" she asked.

"What is it, Princess Philomena?" Baroness Felicity responded.

"Hear the recent news from President-elect Howard Wolff?"

"No, I didn't." Felicity stopped cleaning. "What happened?"

What's this all about? Perpetua eavesdropped on their conversation.

"Apparently, he survived," Philomena said.

"I'm not surprised…" Felicity sneezed.

"God bless you!" Perpetua shouted.

"But that's not all," Philomena continued. "American and NATO soldiers' invaded Poland, just like in 1939. The Pentagon said 'Operation Blitzkrieg' promises to bring peace, freedom, and democracy to the oppressed Polish people, denying Germany and Russia time to start another Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact."

"Are they invading Poland with tanks, planes, and troops?" Felicity snickered.

"They're invading Poland with armies of Ryanites carrying briefcases full of cash," Philomena replied. "GACSS is buying up land from the Poles, land that once belonged to Germany. They're renaming streets, cities and road signs from Polish to German. They're giving Russia large amounts of money to surrender the Kaliningrad Oblast to Germany."

"Oh God, it's so incestuous!" Felicity yawned, stretching her arms. "It never seems to end, does it?"

"Who said that it ended to begin with?" Philomena shook her head. "Behind all the rhetoric of free trade lurks old-school imperialism, not that old faces like Britain, France, Russia, or Japan are all gone now." She folded her arms. "We've just got new faces in that old game: Brazil, China, India, and the United States."

Duchess Perpetua's two-way radio crackled inside her satchel. She picked it up and held it next to her eye. "Four Horsemen here," she spoke into it.

"Honeycomb to Four Horsemen," the Christus Rex leader barked on the other end. "We've got Ryanites at the Museum. Pick up the pace, over."

Perpetua put her radio away. "Pack your bags, everyone!" She howled at everyone. "We're moving out!"

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Meanwhile, a potential lead in Eden had popped up for the Brotzman cousins and their business associates. RGA intelligence had learned that the Conspiracy scheduled a transaction in stolen US government software at the 'People's Municipal Museum' in Underground-held Other-Peoria, Other-Illinois. RGA 4th Army at first achieved a foothold there and much of Other-Illinois before the *Christus Rex* Armored Corps chased them back to Other-Indiana.

Halfrida clutched the gear shift of her Porsche 993 Turbo coupé as she sped past empty city streets. Her handbag rested on the front passenger seat. Something

inside it beeped and emitted a red glow every few seconds. Blocks of Semtex and C4 underneath the car had been rigged to a detonator.

Two other cars followed in her wake. The first was Anthony's Lincoln Versailles. The other was Halfrida's second car, a matte-black Mercedes-Benz 600 *Großer*. Built like a *Panzer*, the six-door luxury sedan commanded both beauty and brawn. Armored plating, tinted windows, picture-proof Pennsylvanian license plates, and lots of attitude–a perfect must-have for any dictator.

The two-way radio inside Halfrida's handbag crackled. "Do you need to drive that fast, Cousin?" Ulrich called out to her over the radio. He was sitting in the front passenger seat in the armored Mercedes.

She glimpsed at the handbag and returned to the road in front of her. The road up ahead led straight to the front steps of the People's Municipal Museum. A garrison of Underground troops positioned behind various windows and sandbags at the front entrance engaged neo-Nazi terrorists storming the building.

Bullets grazed the bulletproof windshield, failing to shatter it. A few managed to hit the Porsche's body, but most of them missed. As she got closer to the entrance, the mischievous grin on her face widened. *Guess we're not the only ones after whatever's inside*, she thought. Slamming her foot on the brake, she grabbed her handbag, opened the driver's door and leaped out of the vehicle.

The Porsche rolled on without her, the driver's door left wide open. Halfrida dove toward a concrete sidewalk, rolled away from the street, and landed on her feet. Unscathed and facing the Museum, she whipped out the detonator and pushed the glowing red button.

The C4 and Semtex charges underneath the Porsche detonated. The explosion left a wide gaping hole where the front entrance once stood. Anyone caught in the blast was blown to pieces or had their limbs or heads decapitated, debris flying all over the place like shrapnel.

Gosh, that never gets old! Halfrida giggled, reaching for her Cz75 Tactical Sports inside her handbag. She stood upright and sprinted toward the Museum entrance. The Lincoln and the Mercedes cruised passed her and pulled over near at the entrance. Chandler, her cousins, and the others got out with M4 Carbines, Kalashnikovs, and German StG44 and G3 assault rifles.

Chandler, Anthony, Marcus, and the others trudged up the steps and went into the museum. Gunfire echoed from within its walls. Ulrich and Heinricka took cover behind the Mercedes with Lance and Drusilla, exchanging potshots with armed terrorists on the roof in front of the museum.

"Get over here, Cousin!" Heinricka screamed.

"Be right there!" Halfrida sprinted as fast as her body would allow. She crossed the street without looking both ways. A Christus Rex Vladimir I/C rolled by and came close to running her over. Time slowed down to became a meaningless concept again. The MAFV's movement was reduced to a crawl. Dozens of bullets veered over her head.

Hey, it's that special time of the month again! Halfrida dove and twirled her body over the Vladimir I/C, her back sliding on the roof of its coaxial turret as she

grabbed an RPG-43 AT grenade from her handbag. More terrorists opened fire from nearby windows. The Vladimir I/C shot a plasma bolt at the building in front of it. The chassis rocked back and forth like a baby in a mother's arms.

The turret turned towards her and the others. *I wonder…will I still be able to do this on or after menopause?* Before landing on her back, Halfrida tossed the RPG-43 at the Vladimir I/C. The grenade cracked the MAFV's turret open, destroying the onboard electronics, sparks flying out of the commander's cupola.

She landed on her back and glided across the pavement. *Will I even make it that far, given my lifestyle choices?* Lying flat on the asphalt, Halfrida got back on her feet. *What the hell am I talking about?* She brushed the dust from her Bishop Dowell uniform and ran behind the Mercedes. Her cousins, Lance and Drusilla popped out of cover and unloaded their guns on full-auto.

Time returned to normal. Halfrida crouched behind the four and took a few seconds to catch her breath. "Guys, I think I'm…"

Ulrich slapped her. "Keep that to yourself, Cousin! We've got more important things on our minds!"

"You can stay with us or go inside to help the boys," Heinricka chimed, reloading her M4 Carbine.

I guess I'll help Chandler out as always. Halfrida sighed. She kept her head down as she rushed up the steps to the entrance and ran through the hole. Inside, she spotted Chandler, Anthony, Marcus, Eddie, Victor, Nathaniel, and Francis running back to the front entrance. Chandler carried a Stinger missile launcher, while Anthony carried two separate briefcases.

A group of Conspiracy paramilitaries chased after them, shooting at them from the hip. "Don't let them escape!" somebody shouted in a German accent.

"Guys," she called out to them, "Did you find what we're looking for?"

They all nodded. "We did," Chandler blared.

"Thank God!" Halfrida made the sign of the cross and went back outside.

Sounds of a helicopter buzzed overhead. Dust whirled in the air outside the front entrance. It lifted up Halfrida's skirt as she hurried down the steps, revealing a miniskirt made of stacks of US $100 bills. *Stop taking away my virginity!* Cheeks reddening, she screamed as loose banknotes floated upward. She stretched her arm to grab them while large caliber bullets tore through the sidewalk and street.

A Christus Rex Apache gunship hovered over the buildings, its machine gun blaring, rockets screaming toward Conspiracy MAFVs. "Nice," the pilot spoke over the radio. Unguided shaped-charge rockets fired from German Panzerfausts whizzed past it. The enemy gunship tilted side-to-side to dodge the rockets.

"Coming through!" Chandler shouted, skipping past Halfrida with a Stinger missile launcher resting on his shoulder. "Where are your manners?" He fired the missile at the Apache.

The enemy gunship tried to evade it. The missile chased after it, splitting the airframe in half. The Apache, consumed by flames and black smoke, spiraled into the building in front of the museum.

Tossing the Stinger aside, Chandler snatched Halfrida and carried her to the armored Mercedes. "Got weapons inside the trunk?" he asked her.

"Mine or Accardo's?" she quipped.

"Yours!" he answered back.

"I do," she told him.

Chandler threw Halfrida through the backseat window of her Mercedes. He and the others hopped into their cars and made a fast getaway out of the city.

***

(*Three days later*)

Secrecy veiled the Brotzman cousins' presence at Other-Peoria, let alone why they were there in the first place. December 12 saw a censored *Peace Through Strength!* newsreel on the recent raid. Fake News covered it in the final black-and-white slide of the December 12 edition, entitled 'National Insecurity'.

Brief scenes of Halfrida and her cousins' handiwork from Underground TV propaganda outlets were shown. Empty shell casings littered the ground. Buildings destroyed or left in ruins. Dead Christus Rex soldiers in pools of blood juxtaposed with more scenes of dead Conspiracy terrorists in dressed all-black military fatigues. Burnt-out MAFVs knocked out in the middle of various streets.

"Something important to American National Security occurred here," Fake News voiced. "What was it, and why are GACSS' friends and enemies snooping around in this city for?"

Archive film from the 1980s showed US government contractors hunched in front of multiple computers inside a well-lit, windowless room. "The answer lies here, at an undisclosed building a few blocks from the Capitol steps," she reported. "Like, this was where the government developed the not-so-secret FCIMS computer software program!"

Eighties music played in the background. An 8-inch black floppy disk levitated over its shadow and rotated clockwise. "FCIMS, or 'Federal Centralized Information Management System', was rumored to have been developed and deployed by the US government under Ronald Reagan."

Next scene featured Fake News accessing the program on her aunt's PC at her government office in the middle of the night. A faint glow from the monitor brightened her cheerful face as she typed away on a dark cyan-colored screen–the software's standard background.

A different camera angle from behind the desk chair exposed the extent of the program. Fake News scrolled down the mouse wheel as she spoke. "The software collated information from various databases and housed them inside a central server. The US later sold copies of the software its American allies."

"You've got classified mail!" a voice spoke through the monitor's speakers.

"Yay, I've got mail!" Fake News cooed. Her monologue continued. "In the Eighties, FCIMS was to the Internet what the Bank of International Settlements (BIS) was to every central bank on Earth."

The newsreel skipped. It cut past portions of footage where Fake News described hostile state actors like the Soviet Union and non-state actors like the

Brotzman family gaining access to the software at one point. The scene involving the Brotzmans featured Heinricka's late mother, typing away on a computer at the family estate near San Carlos de Bariloche.

The newsreel resumed and Fake News' voice returned. "…The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 drove the need for a new version of FCIMS. The government's need for privacy, security, and peace of mind gave birth to Version 5.21." Sounds of a baby cooing played in the background, followed by soft contemporary music. A tiny removable data stick levitated over its shadow and rotated counterclockwise. So small that the camera zoomed in on it a little further. The camera came into focus again.

"Version 5.21 was and still is revolutionary in software design," Fake News' voice echoed. A list appeared beside the data stick as she went. "It could read over a several dozen different computer and lingual languages, tracked monetary transactions, arranged trade in financial instruments, coordinated deployment of spy satellites capturing real-time imagery."

The data stick stopped spinning and a white question mark appeared. "But what does that have to do with the recent events at Other-Peoria?" The screen faded to show Fake News strolling along the sidewalk outside Plaidstadt on a rainy morning. Clad in a dark fedora and matching tinted aviator sunglass, she had her hands dug into the pockets of an overcoat. "Rumors are spreading that GACSS may have access to..." The newsreel came to an abrupt end.

Chapter Sixteen: Everywhere And Nowhere
(Fair Knight and Silent Orphan; Jan. 25-29, 2013)

"Foolish peon, it is improper to suggest that Chapters 16-20 are nothing but filler!"
-Duchess Perpetua Raynerson

Chandler stood erect behind a glass table inside the basement vault beneath the bank at Bedrock Mills. He was wearing a Fackelträger suit, a charcoal black variant of the user's school uniform imbued with physics-bending Anomalies. His battle suit was just his regular St. Maria Goretti uniform. The white dress shirt and school emblem on the long-sleeved sweater glowed, creating an invisible energy field that wrapped his whole body.

Inserting a clip of .40 caliber rounds inside his Smith & Wesson Model 39, he pulled the slide back. The gun was loaded. He pointed the barrel at a cardboard silhouette target, mounted on a wall. His breathing rhythms grew slower as he steadied her grip on the S&W, a finger on the trigger.

At point blank, he squeezed the trigger. The gunshot echoed throughout the room. The bullet hit the center of the silhouette before disintegrating on the thick wall. He fired the next round. A second hole appeared on the silhouette's head. Third shot left a hole on the left shoulder.

He unloaded the rest of the magazine at the target. None of his shots missed; they landed at various spots on the silhouette. He pulled the trigger again. The gun was now empty. Chandler placed the gun on the table. "Bullseye."

Drusilla walked into the bank vault through the opened vault door. Her eyes caught the holes on the target silhouette. Even an MAFV commander like her was not a match for Chandler's elegant shooting. "Is it just me or were you a crack shot before joining the RGA?" she asked him.

"Sorry, but I wasn't." Chandler spoke with humility. "I was mentored."

"Mentored?" Drusilla's eyebrows rose. "Who taught you?"

Chandler smirked at the thought of his girlfriend. Halfrida contacted him through the Telepathic Chat Relay. "Tell her, Chandler," her voice echoed inside his skull. "I will," he promised her, his eyes staring at the ceiling.

The dirty-blonde boy's statement spooked Drusilla. She shuddered, fearing he had gone mad. "Are you talking…to someone?"

He nodded. "I am," he told her. "The one who taught me how to shoot was Halfrida Brotzman."

"Are you serious?" she voiced disbelief. "You were mentored by the twin sister of State Chancellor Harold Brotzman?"

"I'm not joking." Chandler chuckled. "Not only that, she's sending telepathic messages to some subdermal implant inside my head."

"But seriously, I can't believe you joined RGA and got qualified for Accardo's Nightingales in the intelligence field right after basic training." Drusilla leaned on the wall next to the table, stretched her arms and yawned. "That sort of thing doesn't happen, out here in the battlefield."

Chandler scratched his scalp. "Let's just say it's all part of God's plan."

Drusilla giggled. "Sure, I'll take that as an answer."

He stroked his chin. "So you're a 'girl genius' who joined the RGA and became a distinguished veteran from 4th Panzer Division?"

"Damn right!" She held a clenched fist in the air. "I'm a natural with MAFVs, whether it's piloting them or blowing them into a thousand pieces. Like you, I was recruited by Halfrida as part of this bodyguard unit she's creating."

"What's your story?" Chandler holstered his gun.

"I'll tell you later. Right now, Accardo's waiting for us in a building not far from the bank–Bedrock Mills' local coffeehouse."

"Then we better not keep him waiting." Chandler motioned. "Lead the way."

Drusilla nodded. She escorted him out of the bank vault.

Outside, the town's Dweller denizens–many of them Moles–were missing; they had fled from their homes months prior. Bedrock Mills, along with the border defenses east of town had fallen under Ryanite control. In the streets, steel-gray MAFVs covered critical intersections and junctions along the town's main road. St. Louis II/As–miniature Panzer II/Fs–were parked behind debris and sandbags, their energy autocannons and laser guns pointing west.

Squads of RGA troops paced along the concrete sidewalks, clad in Fackelträger battle suits and black Stahlhelms. Machine gunners and snipers were perched atop rooftops of key buildings. Black pickup trucks and gray Maurice II/G Medium MAFVs rolled alongside the infantry on the asphalt roads.

Chandler and Drusilla emerged from the bank at the front entrance, a plywood roof blocking light from the cavern ceiling. They strolled past sandbag walls that plugged in the gaps between the roof's support beams. The sandbags provided ample protection for the RGA troops manning MG34s on tripods. Machine gunners looked on as they trudge down the steps and cross the street.

The coffeehouse door was left wide open. Non-military radio noise emanated from inside. They strolled into the building. The lights flickered like the muzzle flashes of the machine guns guarding the bank. No barista was standing behind the store counter. The Ryanite soldiers inside helped themselves.

Representative Accardo sat on a stool at the counter, alone, smoking a cigar. Smoke flew out of his nostrils as he exhaled. A leather briefcase rested on the counter, Accardo's elbows pressed against the case. Beside the case were an ashtray and an old shortwave radio.

The radio was spitting out Dweller news of Lady Ostara's handiwork in the Dweller World. "Prime Minister Vincent Ludwig of the Independent Dweller Party has declared an all-out crackdown on street sales of D-VIII earlier this week," a woman's voice announced. "Local city governors are now working to combat a growing drug epidemic on our poorest towns and cities."

"You can start by impeaching that drug kingpin you've got as your Prime Minister," Accardo muttered under his throat.

Chandler and Drusilla went to the stools next to Accardo. Chandler, seated on Accardo's right, switched the radio off. "That's enough enemy propaganda for today," Chandler told Accardo, "Don't you think, boss?"

"About time you and Drusilla came," Accardo said. He put out his cigar.

"Do we any orders for the night?" Drusilla asked.

"See this briefcase I have?" Accardo knocked an elbow on the case. "Took me months and hundreds of miles to get it over here." He sighed. "Would have gotten here sooner, if the Silent Orphan wasn't hunting my runners."

"The Silent Orphan," Chandler pondered, "Who's he?"

"You've never heard of him, Chandler?" Accardo said in disbelief.

He shook his head. "Name doesn't ring a bell."

"Silent Orphan's a disgraced officer, used to be one of the top snipers in the Independent Dweller Army," Accardo clarified. "But that changed once we found ourselves at war with their ally, the Underground."

"I've heard of him," Drusilla voiced. "Hundreds of unlucky Ryanite and Remnants soldiers, officers, and generals had fallen into his crosshairs."

Anthony shook his head. "Oh, but that's not worst part."

Chandler's eyebrows rose. "What's the worst part?"

"Patience," Anthony answered, "Can wait for whole weeks before firing a single shot. He's *everywhere and nowhere*, now he's inside this town."

"Are you saying he's hiding in one of the buildings in Bedrock Mills?" Drusilla asked. "Did he follow one of our runners?"

"Like I said, Drusilla, this briefcase would have gotten here sooner if the Silent Orphan wasn't so persistent…or clever." Accardo pointed at the ground. He's waiting for me to exit this coffeehouse; by then, he'll have me lined up for a well-placed shot." He made a gunshot noise with his mouth. "Dead."

"Something we can do to help?" Chandler spoke.

Accardo stroked his chin. "Given his elusiveness, I suggest not hunting him, even if we have the numbers. Instead, I need a diversion; a brief window to get me out of here and past West-Emory Bridge."

"By that point, you'll be at Checkpoint Able below KBM and heading straight to Castle Blackstone," Drusilla said.

"You got it, Drusilla." Anthony gave her a high-five. "He won't make it past Checkpoint Able, unless he wants to scale the thirty foot walls we built there."

"And for one person, that's a herculean task," Chandler chimed. "Got any ideas, Anthony?"

The Nightingale leader suggested, "I'll take the service entrance and try to navigate through the alleys and side streets. In the meantime, apply your knowledge as squad leader to outsmart him."

"It's all on you, Chandler," Drusilla added.

"Don't you mean 'it's all on Halfrida'?" Chandler's eyes looked up at the ceiling. "Isn't that right?"

Halfrida Brotzman's body materialized at the coffeehouse entrance. Clad in a female Bishop Dowell uniform, she flicked her bottle blonde hair and lifted her

chest up to accentuate her hourglass figure. Neither Drusilla nor Accardo could perceive her presence.

But Chandler did. Eyes fluttering, limp wrists exposed, she winked at him. "That's right, Chandler. You still have that Invisibility Anomaly on you?"

Reaching into his pockets, Chandler pulled out the Invisibility Anomaly. He held it above the counter. "I still have it."

"Give it to Accardo." Halfrida dematerialized.

Chandler turned to Accardo and placed it next to the briefcase. "It's all yours, Anthony. Keep it if you make it out of Bedrock Mills alive."

"And here I was, thinking you've gone off the deep end." Accardo grabbed the Invisibility on one hand and took the handle of the briefcase on the other.

"Do I look crazy, Anthony?" Chandler laughed. "How else am I supposed to communicate with Halfrida telepathically?"

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(*Four days later*)

Yellow diamond road signs were erected throughout the town upon Representative Accardo's departure. They bore the silhouette of a sniper looking through the scope of a sniper rifle. Below the sign was a rectangular one that read, "CAUTION! IDA SNIPER AT WORK!" in bold black letters.

At the coffeehouse, Chandler spent his days on a stood in front of the counter. He sipped on a cup of coffee, his other hand twisting the dials and knobs on the shortwave radio. He tuned the radio to Wonderland's own radio station, WLPR. The station shared the subterranean airwaves with enemy propaganda broadcasts and a whole host of Dweller stations.

Static emitted from the speakers. Chandler adjusted the radio's frequency by a tiny bit until the white noise was replaced with a teenage boy with a German accent. "Nothing is stopping Canada's Bauer Industries and its triumphant march," he declared. "The company's market share has rocketed for the tenth day now. Experts express concerns that the corporate giant is monopolizing the country's manufacturing sector."

Chandler switched the radio off.

Drusilla sat on the stool next to him. She gulped the last of her coffee from a ceramic mug before placing it on the counter. "Nothing good on the radio?"

"Uh-uh," he replied. "To be honest, Drusilla, I honestly don't care."

"You don't mind being bored?"

He shook his head. "No." He turned to her. "It's not like the boredom of garrisoning this town is bad. Being bored here is way better than getting shot at by Underground in Eden."

She chuckled. "Casualties in the Otherworld are nothing, Chandler."

"Look, I don't know about you, but I'm not coming home in a body bag." He sighed. "And besides, it's bad enough that some of us are forced to miss a few days of class because of this war."

Drusilla's feet kicked back and forth whilst seated. "Then why'd you join the RGA if you're going to complain?"

"I'm not complaining."

"Answer the question."

"You're not going to stop, are you?"

She nodded. "I can be a pushy girl sometimes."

"I joined the RGA, because Halfrida Brotzman chose me as a prospect, a candidate in her brother's personal bodyguard unit." He looked away from her. "Now that I mentioned it, that's what I told you several days ago."

"Of course you did," Drusilla said. "Nobody's denying that. But having connections doesn't motivate anyone to become an RGA soldier." She rolled her eyes at the ceiling. "What motivates you?"

Chandler eyed Drusilla. "I felt convinced that God has chosen me to pursue this path in life." He turned his head toward her. "My discernment for the priesthood in the FSSP made me fall in love with Halfrida."

Drusilla gave him a coy smile, her green eyes twinkling like emeralds. "You're in love with Halfrida Brotzman? That's, like, a one in a million chance!"

"I'm not joking," he confessed. "A part of me feels 'Halfrida loves brave blonde soldiers who fight to the death'. As long as it's not me, Halfrida or her brother, that's fine by me. That's why I'm not so lenient on fighting in the Otherworld." He grabbed his cup of coffee and sipped it.

Chandler continued, "And if rumors are true, her brother enjoys having seventy-two blonde, blue-eyed girls in his presence with lacy lingerie and stiletto heels…" He stroked his chin. "Wait, is it the other way around?"

"What's the other way around?"

"He looks all dolled-up and wears lacy lingerie and stiletto heels in the presence of seventy-two blonde, blue-eyed girls who cater to his every whim."

Drusilla laughed and banged a clenched fist on the counter three times.

Erotic, steamy thoughts involving State Chancellor Harold Brotzman and his harem crept into Chandler's mind. He sulked in disgust and stuck his tongue out. "Golly, I wish I didn't share this stuff with someone as young as you, Drusilla." He shook his head. "What was I thinking?"

"You don't need to be shy." Drusilla smiled. "Let it all out!"

Chandler's cocked his head to the side. "Uh, how old are you again?"

"Eleven," she told him, "Turning twelve in less than five months."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Sometimes, you act older than you look."

"That's because my mom raised me on her own," she reminded him. "I never met my dad, and my mom has no idea whether he's alive or not."

"Is that so? Since I told you about my motivations, now's your turn."

She nodded. "For me, I joined because I didn't want the American Dream. Instead, I chose the Plaid Dream."

"The Plaid Dream?" Chandler pondered. "What's that?"

"An era of spiritual growth and prosperity, where Ryanites like us can utilize the Anomalies to better the rest of humanity. A new golden age where Western Civilization is reborn, Catholic Education has reclaimed its former greatness, and the return to traditional values."

"So that's this Plaid Dream you describe?"

"Yes," she answered, "There's also something else on my mind, and it involves my father."

"What about him?"

"When this war ends and God decides that I should live," she swore to him. "I'm going to…look for him."

"Do you have any idea where he is?"

Her lips curled and her nose crinkled. "I don't know, Chandler." Drusilla sighed. "There's nothing I want more in my life than meeting my father."

"And what if he's dead?"

"Then I'll figure out where he's buried."

"But if he's alive, he should be ashamed for not raising you."

Drusilla smiled. "Thanks Chandler."

They gave each other a high-five. "We're in this together, Drusilla," Chandler told her. "It's the least I can do for you."

"And I'll vouch on your behalf when the time comes for you to join this bodyguard unit." She wiped a tear from her eye with her wrist.

Outside, three loud gunshots rang out in rapid succession. Wailing cries and voices followed. "Search the area!" someone yelled. "The Silent Orphan has got to be here somewhere!"

A college-aged woman's voice howled, "Did we lose anyone?"

"No, his shots hit no one," a man's voice responded.

"That must be him," Drusilla commented. "I'm surprised no one's been able to catch him these past several days."

"Then again, he's one of the best snipers the IDA has," Chandler added.

"Yeah, tell me about it." Drusilla chuckled.

Chandler got off his stool. "Should we return to the bank entrance?"

"We should." Drusilla beckoned Chandler to lead the way. "After you."

Trudging up the steps of the bank, Chandler and Drusilla ran up to the sandbag wall on the left side of the entrance. Behind the sandbags was an MG34 light machine gun mounted on tripod. The gun itself was pointed at the road on the left side of the bank and the building housing the coffeehouse.

Three Ryanites were crouched around the machine gun nest, acting as gun's crew. The gunner, an athletic platinum blonde, dark blue-eyed boy loaded a belt of Mauser 7.92mm bullets into the chamber. The loader, a strawberry blonde and dark blue-eyed girl occupied the left side of the machine gun. She was playing a video game on her PSP. On the right was the observer, a dark-brown and blue-eyed boy with a Dweller-issue Mosin Nagant bolt-action rifle in hand.

Chandler and Drusilla crouched behind the machine gun crew. "Who are you three?" Chandler asked the three. "Have you I seen you guys before?"

All three Ryanites shook their heads. "I don't think we have," the gunner told him. "What's your name?"

"Chandler Martinsen," Chandler said to the gunner, "You?"

"Percival Alexander Richardson," the gunner replied. He pointed at the loader. "That's my sister, Jennifer Maryanne–my other sister." He then patted the observer's shoulder. "And this is Joseph MacDonald."

Joseph shook Chandler's hand. "Nice to meet you," he greeted.

"A pleasure," Chandler said.

"Likewise," Drusilla added.

Jennifer switched her PSP off and placed it inside a pouch on her person. "Huh, what's going on?"

"You could have said that earlier," Joseph commented.

"Silent Orphan tried to kill one of the officers on the roof," Percival reported to everyone. "Almost got him, and he's now on the run."

"Do we have people looking for the Silent Orphan, Percival?" Drusilla asked. "I can pitch in by rallying my crew and manning an MAFV."

"That won't be necessary," Percival retorted.

"Are you sure?" questioned Drusilla.

"Yes," he answered. "Orders are orders. We're supposed to protect the bank at all cost until we are relieved of our duties."

"Either that, or Representative Accardo returns from his long talk with High Command back at Castle Blackstone," Jennifer said.

Joseph picked up his black Stahlhelm off the ground between his feet. He tightened the leather strap around his chin and grabbed his binoculars atop the sandbags. With the binoculars, he proceeded to scan the rooftops and windows of the nearby buildings for the Silent Orphan.

The surnames of the machine gun crew sounded familiar to Chandler. "Are you guys related to Representatives Margaret Diana Richardson and Joseph MacDonald by any chance?"

"I'm one of Henry's three brothers," Joseph replied.

"For Margaret, Jen and I are her quadruplet siblings." Percival reached into his pocket and pulled out a photograph. He gave it to Chandler.

Chandler gazed at the photo. It depicted the four Richardson siblings in a group shot. On a summer day in their backyard, Percival and Jennifer stood beside their sister and brother. Margaret, the other Richardson sister, wore a pair of eyeglasses with round lenses, her platinum blonde hair tied back with a royal blue ribbon. Next to her was the fourth sibling, a platinum blonde boy named James.

He returned the photo to Percival. "I never had siblings," Chandler commented. "What's that like?"

"Better than being the only child in a family," Percival said.

Gunfire and explosions echoed across the cavern walls. Loud voices followed with the sound of more explosions. "That's not good," Drusilla muttered.

"It isn't," Jennifer agreed.

"Looks like the Silent Orphan brought along some company." Joseph put the binoculars down and turned to Drusilla. "Drusilla, you may want to get to your crew at the outskirts of town and alert the other MAFV crews."

Drusilla nodded. "I'll do what I can." She stood up and left the others.

Joseph spoke to Chandler. "I know we'd just met, but nobody wants to go home in a body bag. Can I trust that you'll get all five of us back in one piece?"

"You count on me." Chandler nodded.

"Then follow me." Joseph got up and ran into the bank with Chandler.

***

(*Several minutes earlier*)

Virgil returned to Bedrock Mills, in pursuit of a different prey. At the steps of an abandoned and looted Eastern Hares temple, he opened its sturdy wooden doors. An unsuspecting RGA patrol was advancing on the main road to the east. In a panic, he sprinted inside, slammed the door shut and took a moment to catch his breath. "They didn't see me, didn't see me, didn't see me," he uttered.

Lady Ostara's voice echoed inside his skull. "Have you reached the town?"

"I have," Virgil replied. His hands were wrapped around his trusty Dragunov rifle. "As planned, the assault will commence as should as I assassinate the officer in charge of the defenses tonight."

"*Gut, sehr gut*," Ostara said. "Be good." Her voice faded from his mind.

Virgil crept deeper into the building, straddling his sniper rifle and an M79 grenade launcher on his back as we went. The corridor ahead led to small altar. Religious statues were missing from two pedestals occupying the sides of the room. The offerings, however, remained on the ground around the pedestals.

Past the altar was an entranceway on the left that led to a small room. The room had a spiral staircase that went upstairs. Virgil traveled up the steps. The spiral staircase led to the second floor and a small tower on the top floor. Towards the end of the stairs, he spotted a tripwire. The wire was connected to a bouquet of egg-shaped hand grenades with gray fuze caps.

"If I break this…" Virgil gazed at the tripwire and the bouquet. "…They'll go off…" He smirked. "Huh, the Ryanites here have a bit of common sense for once." He went over the tripwire and continued to the roof.

The rotting corpse of an IDA soldier was slumped over a slit on the temple tower. Virgil pushed the body over. The cadaver fell off the slit, rolling down the sloped roof before hitting the ground below.

The slit, unobstructed, overlooked the eastern side of the town. A few miles down was the town bank. Virgil positioned himself at the slit. He leaned the M79 on a short wall facing the north and loaded a magazine into his Dragunov.

Virgil looked into the rifle's scope. "Target should be somewhere…"

An RGA officer stood on top of the bank's rooftop. The Ryanite wore the standard-issue Fackelträger suit and a matching black peaked officer's cap. He had a pair of binoculars, allowing him to survey the town's scenery. A two-way radio was kept close at hand inside a pouch on his field webbing.

"Target bears no resemblance to that guy I was hunting last week." Virgil steadied his aim. "What gives? Either way, I got a clear shot…" The officer was now in his crosshairs. Virgil turned the knob on his scope to get a better look at his prey. His heartbeat grew slower upon finding acne scar on the officer's face.

He inhaled and held his breath. The reticule inside the scope steadied, Virgil pulled the trigger. "Goodbye."

The bullet struck the officer's forehead. Piercing the skull, the bullet destroyed critical areas of the brain as it traveled through the officer. It exited the skull as the officer slumped to the ground, dead.

"Scratched one Ryanite officer," Virgil whispered.

"Is he dead?" Ostara's voice returned to his skull.

"Good as dead," Virgil replied. "Call in the artillery and rally the troops."

Chapter Seventeen: Defending The Bank (Ryanite Chorus; January 29th-Feb 2nd, 2013)

"War is the continuation of politics by other means."

-Carl von Clausewitz, On War

Underground MAFVs emerged from the tunnel entrances a few miles west of Bedrock Mills. The hulls sported dark olive green paintjobs. On the turret sides, Underground roundels–a red cross within a solid white diamond–were painted in bright colors. Forward elements consisted of St. Longinus III/Fs, Light MAFVs based on the Soviet T-70 tank. Columns of the two-man MAFV stopped along the roadways leading into the town.

In their wake, platoons of dark-green St. Marcella V/8s advanced in a neat column. The Marcella's sloped chassis, wide tracks and small turret bore an uncanny resemblance to the Soviet T-34/76. Each turret came with a cupola, freeing commanders from the task of also being turret gunners.

The Marcellas parked along the roads outside the town. After them came fleets of M3 halftracks, Studebaker trucks and another MAFV: the St. Joan V/8, casemate self-propelled artillery MAFVs based on the Marcella V/8. Like the Marcella, the Joans were patterned after the SU-85, a vehicle whose chassis was based on the T-34.

Parking behind the Marcellas, platoons of Joans formed three long, neat rows. The barrels of their cannons began to rise as the gunners adjusted their sights on the town to the west. One by the one, the Joans hurled a salvo of pale red plasma bolts at the town.

The bolts traveled across the cavern in midair, eventually landing at numerous areas in the town. Several landed on the roofs of a couple buildings, destroying them upon impact. Others cratered nearby streets and sidewalks. A few managed to land on RGA defenses inside the town, vaporizing and charring soldiers and MAFVs to molten ash.

The Longinus III/Fs began to move. They rolled into the town with the Marcellas in town. Mechanized and motorized infantry, dressed in khaki fatigues and Soviet-styled helmets, disembarked from their halftracks and troop transports. In large companies, they entered the town on foot, traveling alongside the armor. The artillery continued, the plasma bolts landing further and further into the town.

Throughout Bedrock Mills, loudspeakers mounted on telephone poles crackled as someone manned the town PA system. "Enemy forces approaching the bank," Chandler shouted. "This is not a drill, I repeat, this is not a drill!"

Between the invaders and the town bank was a perimeter of fortifications. RGA troops garrisoned inside buildings and took positions behind sandbags blocking off whole streets. Trios of Ryanites rushed out of some buildings and rushed to machine gun nests and PaK40 antitank cannons. Gasoline engines of Louis and Maurice MAFVs began running, their onboard targeting computers and systems coming online.

Before long, Underground and RGA soldiers faced each other along Main Street and in the side streets between it. Time slowed to a disorienting blur as soldiers and MAFVs from both sides stared at each other through their gunsights. Neither Underground homeschoolers nor Ryanite RGAs viewed the other as God-fearing young Catholics worthy of God's Kingdom. What they saw instead were 'lesser-Catholics' with deranged delusions of empire and a score to settle.

Jingoistic hatred and resentment festered within. Fingers pulled triggers. Bullets, laser beams, and plasma bolts flew in the air. In a split-second, dozens of RGA and Underground soldiers fell. Laser and plasma ricocheted on MAFV hulls, while others exploded into fireballs. Dozens more succumbed as minutes passed.

The Underground troops crawled on their bellies or took cover from the Ryanites' gunfire. Supporting MAFVs fired smoke canister shells to conceal the infantry's movements. A commanding officer called out to his subordinates. "Fix bayonets! Assault and harass! Send them to hell!"

"Fix bayonets!" several Underground sergeants yelled.

As they attached their bayonets to the barrels of their rifles, Underground soldiers chanted, "Death to the Ryanites!" In a reckless assault, they charged through the thick smoke, bullets whizzing past them. A few got hit and fell in pools of their own blood. The others continued on without them.

Emerging from the smoke, Underground troops shouted cries whilst closing in on the Ryanites' positions. Soon, infantry from both sides found themselves at close quarters. Up close, things got personal and dirty. Bayonets plunged into flesh, rifle butts cracked skulls, and brass knuckles broke noses. Molotov cocktails and bundles of stick hand grenades were chucked at the engines of MAFVs.

The Ryanites retreated before the onslaught. In a hurry, they rushed to their defensive positions around the town bank. The Underground pursued them.

The Underground commanding officer led the charge from the front. He beckoned his subordinates to follow him. "Drive them out of Bedrock Mills, people!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "No quarter! Death to the Ryanites!"

"Death to the Ryanites!" they shouted back.

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From the bank's reception area, Chandler followed Joseph across the building to the offices on the other side. Joseph jogged into a large storage room devoid of its original filing cabinets, safes, and the occasional safety deposit box. In their place were several stacks of wooden crates. Opening them revealed a wide selection of RGA-issue heavy ordnance: German weapons from World War II and the Cold War.

Joseph smiled at the weapons. "Looks like High Command was generous, Chandler." He pointed at each available weapon. "We got MG34s, Panzerfausts, Teller landmines…" Reaching into a small crate, he picked up a funnel-shaped grenade with three magnets attached to the base. "Never seen this before."

"These are 'Safecracker' grenades," Chandler explained. He took two and tucked them inside his rucksack. "They're meant to be thrown." He grabbed a

third and showed Joseph the magnets. "See these? They'll latch onto the chassis of an MAFV or other vehicle, regardless of the angle."

"Take a couple more with you then," Joseph said. "Might come in handy."

"Good idea." Chandler grabbed several more and dumped them into his rucksack. He pointed at a wooden box of Panzerfaust antitank recoilless launchers. "Help me out with those, Joe."

A loud explosion erupted. An enemy artillery shell landed in a building not far from the bank. Joseph nodded. "On it." He and Chandler rushed to the box of Panzerfausts and together hauled it out of the room.

In the hallway towards the front entrance, the two-way radio on Chandler's person began to crackle. "Fair Knight, this is Action Andy, respond over."

"Hold up, Joe, I need to answer this." Chandler halted and settled the box on the floor with Joseph's help. He spoke into his radio. "Action Andy, this is Fair Knight and I'm reading you loud and clear. Talk to me."

"We just received reports that the Underground and IDA troops are beginning to launch a decisive offensive to seize Wonderland and bring about a swift end to Brotzmanskrieg," Accardo reported. "Orders are to hold the line and stall the offensive until High Command can launch a counterattack."

Gunfire broke out from the front entrance. The Richardson siblings and the other machine gun crews near the bank began firing their guns at approaching Underground. "I should also inform you that the officer from 4th RGA Panzer Division has fallen," Chandler said. "The Nightingales and elements of 4th RGA Panzer Division are being overwhelmed. Should we fall back to the Border?"

"Negative Fair Knight," Accardo replied. "You have your orders."

"What about you?"

"High Command, in all its wisdom, snatched anyone they could get their hands on for this counterattack. Now get going!"

Chandler shook his head. He put his radio away. "I hope they know what they're doing," he whispered to himself. Chandler turned to Joseph. "Come on, let's head back to the Front!"

Joseph nodded. He and Chandler grabbed picked up the box, rushed through the hallway and exited the building.

Back outside, they ran back to the bank's entrance, and ducked behind the sandbag walls with Percival and Jennifer. The two boys dropped the box beneath an small overturned table. Joseph reached for his Mosin-Nagant, while Chandler grabbed his rifle, a StG44 assault rifle.

"I'll cover the road on the left." Joseph pointed at the street.

Chandler pointed at the other road. "I'll cover our right flank."

They took positions beside the siblings.

The siblings were manning their MG34 machine gun. Jennifer loaded the machine gun rounds and Percival focused his attention at Underground infantry rushing from the road at their eleven o'clock. He unleashed a fusillade at them, forcing the enemy infantry to seek cover in adjacent alleys and buildings.

Facing his one o'clock, Chandler observed a parked Louis II/A MAFV firing at enemy MAFVs approaching down the right-hand road. Drusilla and her crew were operating the Louis II/A from a room near Checkpoint Able.

Chandler cocked his rifle and assisted Drusilla by aiming his StG44 at the enemy infantry. Down range, he spotted a lone soldier running for cover. With him in his sights, he squeezed a few rounds. Bullets struck the enemy's head, chest and thorax. "Bullseye," Chandler declared.

On the right-hand road to the bank, a pair of St. Longinus III/Fs advanced down the asphalt street. Armed with autocannons, the turrets roared at the Ryanite infantry garrisoning the buildings ahead of them. Two Ryanites on the second floor above the coffeehouse were slain in a hail of cannon fire.

The gunner on Drusilla's Louis II/A took aim at the Longinus on the left side of the street. He took a moment to adjust his aim and fired a short barrage of autocannon shells at it. Most of the rounds ricocheted on the Longinus's sloped armor. The Louis II/A's onboard autoloader inserted the next set of shells. The gunner sent another barrage at the same Longinus.

The duo of Longinus was now fifty yards from the bank entrance. At this range, the shells tore through the sloped chassis, piercing its turret hydraulics, suspension and transmission. The turret jammed, the Longinus grinded to a halt. Black smoke billowed from the engine on the Longinus's right.

Another wave of shells penetrated the hull of the other Longinus. The shells destroyed the onboard computer. The crew of the second Longinus lost control. It steered leftward and crashed into a building to the right of the coffeehouse.

The MG34s began to overheat. Another wave of infantry was approaching, forcing the machine gunners to replace their gun barrels. In a hurry, Jennifer removed the hot gun barrel with a wet rag, and inserted a new one. Her brother kept himself busy by loading a fresh ammo belt into their gun.

At the road on the bank's left, bullets flew past three Ryanites behind a PaK40 cannon. The cannon's gun shield absorbed some of the bullets, acting as makeshift cover. The loader removed an expended shell from the chamber. The gunner adjusted the trajectory and angle of the cannon. The observer poked his head over the gun shield, searching for new targets with a pair of binoculars.

An Underground Marcella V/8 crashed through a building across the street. "Marcella ahead, Marcella ahead," the observer shouted, patting the gunner's shoulder. "Range two hundred feet. Change sights to new angle and trajectory."

"Got it." the gunner adjusted the cannon's sights. "Load the next AP shell."

"Fire when ready," the observer added.

The AT crew loader slammed a dark-gray-tipped armor piercing shell into the PaK40. The gunner fired a shot at the incoming Marcella. The shell collided with its front, absorbing most of the impact. Apart from a small dent between the hull-mounted laser machine gun and driver's port, the MAFV was still operational.

The enemy Marcella retaliated. It scored a direct hit on the Ryanite PaK40, destroying it and its three crew members. Supported by a platoon of Underground soldiers, the Marcella continued its advance towards the bank.

Joseph spotted the Marcella. "We got armor," he alerted the others.

As the Marcella got closer, Joseph turned around and reached for a Panzerfaust from the crate. Unfolding the safety revealed a squeezable lever to launch the shaped charge warhead. He placed the steel rod on his shoulder and looked through its makeshift sight, a set three small holes on the foldable safety.

He used the holes to guide his aim. With the Marcella in his sights, Joseph pushed the lever down and sent the warhead toward the Marcella. The warhead detonated on impact, leaving behind a hole on what used to be the driver's port.

On the right-hand road, Drusilla's Louis II/A faced enemy infantry supported by a machine gun mounted on armored Toyota Hilux. The Louis II/A's gunner wiggled the turret controls. Blue streams of light zoomed toward the enemy soldiers.

The soldiers ducked and hassled for cover in the alleys and buildings lining the street. The autocannon shells ended up hitting an enemy gun truck. After multiple hits on the radiator, the vehicle's engine caught on fire. It exploded, the debris flew in midair.

Surviving Underground soldiers exited from cover. Chandler emptied his rifle at them. The rifle's magazine dry, he crouched behind the sandbags and replaced the empty mag. He reemerged from cover and caught six Underground soldiers in his sights. The enemy opened up as they rushed toward the bank. Aiming at the ones closest to the Louis II/A, he pulled the trigger. A rifleman, blood gushing from his torso, fell.

Drusilla's MAFV massacred the remaining survivors. The turret's autocannon roared alongside the coaxial and hull-mounted laser machine guns. The street ahead of the Louis II/A was blanketed with hundreds of energy rounds and dozens of projectile shells.

Grabbing her rifle, a semi-automatic G43, Jennifer stood up and fired a few rounds at retreating Underground troops. All of her shots missed. A stray bullet hit her abdomen, knocking her off her feet. The bullet disintegrated upon striking the faint blue energy field wrapped around her Fackelträger suit. The energy field itself shattered as well.

Joseph rushed to Jennifer. "Are you okay?" He held out his hand to her.

She nodded. "I'm fine." She grabbed Joseph's hand and brought herself back to her feet. "Thank God, this armor saved my life."

He made the sign of the cross. "Amen."

They returned to their positions and continued fighting.

Underground troops retreated. Jennifer pointed at them. "They're retreating!"

"You think so, Jen?" Percival questioned. "It just means they're regrouping. They'll back with more MAFVs and with stuff like air support."

Chandler's two-way radio crackled. "Fair Knight…," Drusilla called out, the gunfire drowning out her voice. "This is Dewy-Princess…respond, over…" He reached for his radio. "Dewy-Princess, this is Fair Knight. What's your status?"

"I can see a large convoy of St. Marcella V/8s," she reported. "These miniature T-34 tanks are immune to my weapons. I need you guys to handle the armored threat, over."

"Wilco Dewy-Princess," replied Chandler, "Over and out." He put the radio away and grabbed his Panzerfaust. He sprinted across the sidewalk, past the rear flank of Drusilla's MAFV. Crossing the street, Chandler turned left and entered the jewelry store next to the coffeehouse.

Inside, an artillery shell landed in a nearby building. The intense vibration knocked Chandler off his feet. He got up and ran to the back of the showroom, went up the rear stairway and followed it to the roof. On the roof, he jogged up to a concrete barrier and drew his Panzerfaust.

Chandler kneeled before the concrete barrier and opened the weapon's safety, revealing a lever acting as the trigger. He placed the weapon on his shoulder. A Marcella rolling down an intersection entered his sights. Chandler squeezed the lever down. The warhead collided with the turret, knocking out the Marcella. Chandler tossed the empty tube into the street below.

Sniper rounds were sent Chandler's way, forcing him to take cover. Virgil's persistence shortened his temper. "Silent Orphan," he screamed at the top of his lungs, "Leave us the hell alone!" He reached into his pockets, pulled out two handheld detonators and pushed their shiny red buttons.

Several deafening explosions engulfed entire parts of the town. Chandler peeked over the barrier, tilting his head up to watch the detonations. Within the blast radius, friend and foe alike were annihilated. Numerous buildings, collapsed under their weight, their structural supports destroyed. Rubble and debris showered the streets, smoke covering whole blocks.

Silence returned to the town ruins, followed by cheering voices from other Ryanites. Chandler observed the damage. Debris and burnt out wrecks formed obstacles that prevented the enemy from continuing their assault.

The two-way radio crackled again. He reached for it. "This is Fair Knight."

"Fair Knight, this is Dewy-Princess," Drusilla said. "Don't rest just yet, the enemy is preparing for another attack."

"Another attack? How many of them are there?"

"You don't want to know. Listen, I have an idea: take shelter inside the bank vault with the others. My crew and I, along with the other MAFV crews, will be retreating from the Border."

"That goes against our orders. We're supposed to…"

"Screw that, Fair Knight, there's way too many of them! Now, do me a favor and hide inside the bank vault until Action Andy and I can relieve you four."

Chandler paused and reflected on the promise he made to Joseph. Drusilla's voice came out of the radio. "Fair Knight, Fair Knight, you still there?"

"Look, this goes against my better judgement, I'll do it if it means me and others will survive. Fair Knight out." He got up and left the rooftop.

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(*Two days later*)

Underground bombers and ground attack A-Wing planes poured out of the ventilation shafts on the cavern walls to the west. Dark blue St. Basil Ba-152As, twin-engine bombers patterned after the Tupolev Tu-2, soared over Bedrock Mills in box formations. Squadrons of St. Godfrey Go-4Cs flew alongside the Ba-152As in loose finger-fours. The Godfreys dispersed and circled around the town for stubborn ground targets.

On the ground, Several Ryanite MAFVs, antitank cannons remained active throughout the town. They kept the Underground ground troops from overrunning the infantry and advancing past the bank. Godfreys strafed around Ryanite-held streets with plasma cannons, laser machine guns and unguided rockets. Bombs were over Maurices and Louis MAFVs, reducing them to piles of Anomaly-fused scrap metal.

Atop the roofs of five buildings near the bank, five quad-barrel FlaK cannons fired at the approaching Ba-152s and strafing Go-4Cs. AA gun crews propelled hundreds of shells at the cavern ceiling. Thin dark clouds plumed over the town, as AA shells burst and scattered shrapnel. The fuselage of a Ba-152 split in half. Another had its left wing ripped in half, and a third had its rudder blown off.

Three Go-4Cs also sustained direct hits. Their engines caught ablaze, they lost control, spiraling and sputtering flames on the way down. One Godfrey crashed into a building, clipping its wings as it smashed through an intact window. The second crash-landed on a street littered with bullet-ridden bodies and burning MAFV wrecks. The last Godfrey crashed toward the one of the FlaK guns, the crew fleeing for safety seconds before impact.

As the bombers flew over the fortifications along the Ryanite-Dweller Border, their bomb bay doors opened. Scores of small bombs, each weighing five hundred kilograms of explosives, carpeted everything on Checkpoint Able with explosions. Guard houses, guard towers, concrete bunkers, pillboxes, even the thirty foot concrete wall were leveled. None of the defenders at Checkpoint Able survived once the smoke cleared.

Rubble blocking off the roads leading to the bank was destroyed with boxed of time explosives. Hundreds of Underground soldiers advanced through the streets, accompanied by several companies of Studebaker trucks, M3 halftracks, and Longinus and Marcella MAFVs. Building by building, room by room, the Ryanites were flushed out of the town.

In the wake of the advancing Underground, IDA troops, trucks and MAFVs rolled into the ruins of Bedrock Mills. They came into the town and flooded the streets by the thousands. The Dweller soldiers proceeded past the buildings and the remains of Checkpoint Able on the way to Ryanite-controlled Wonderland.

***

(*Two days later*)

At Blackstone, inside a dimmed room reserved for MAFV crews, Drusilla mounted a helmet and visor over her head. The visor connected her to a tiny camera on her new MAFV's cupola, positioned atop the turret. The camera provided live imagery in real time. It showed the vehicle moving alongside a

convoy of other MAFVs. Whenever Drusilla turned her head, the cupola's camera pointed in the direction she was facing.

Her helmet picked up a transmission from Action Andy. "Dewy-Princess," he said over the radio, "This is Action Andy. We're counting on you and the armored forces to clear the tunnel leading to Plaidstadt's lower levels."

"Roger," Drusilla replied, "Over and out."

Up ahead, Drusilla spotted an Underground blockade. Technicals parked behind sandbag walls stood beside infantry wielding Mosin-Nagants, PPSh-41s and DP-27 machine guns. Within seconds, the technicals opened fire, launching TOW rockets at the Ryanites MAFVs. The vehicles in front of Drusilla were destroyed by the rockets.

Her gunner watched a bar at the bottom of his visor to fill up. "Loaded," Drusilla declared to him upon completion. He pointed the turret's cannon at the technical on his left. Aiming for its engine, he pulled the trigger on his joystick. The pale green light pierced the engine, causing the vehicle to explode. The explosion killed the crew and anyone positioned next to it.

"Next round's coming up," Drusilla said. "Quick, go for the other one."

The gunner tilted his joystick to the right. He fired another round, this time at the other technical. It exploded like a burning fireball, colliding with the ceiling before crashing on the ground.

The surviving MAFVs in the convoy rolled past Drusilla's. They fired their hull and coaxial laser guns at the remaining Underground infantry. Their combined firepower slaughtered anyone left standing. Running over lifeless bodies and ramming through burning wrecks, they cleared the way for Drusilla.

"Driver," she called out to him, "Forward."

"Yes ma'am." He pushed his thumb up on his controller. The Maurice II/G caught up with the rest of the convoy. Up ahead he spotted at an armored engagement between other Maurice II/Gs and Underground Marcellas. "Heads up, Drusilla!"

"Gunner, prepare to engage the enemy Marcellas," she told him.

The gunner adjusted the turret's gunsight aimed at the nearest Marcella and fired the cannon. The plasma bolt flew across the close-range battle to reach the target. It struck the Marcella's front armor.

"Load the next round," she barked.

The gunner fired another round. His second shot destroyed the left tread. "He ain't going anywhere."

"Nice shooting. Keep up the fire."

The Marcellas, outnumbered by the assaulting Maurices, stood their ground. Their sloped armor continued to deflect the Ryanite plasma bolts. For a moment, they seemed to be keeping the enemy at bay. Unbeknownst to them, another Ryanite armored formation flanked them.

From one of the two tunnels behind the enemy, a platoon of St. Hubert II/B MAFV Destroyers appeared. Built on the chassis of the Maurice I, these turretless

warhorses mimicked the StuG III/F, dedicated tank killers modified from the Panzer III chassis. Parking behind the enemy, they zeroed in on their rear engines.

One by one, the Hubert II/Bs fired, destroying the Marcellas in a brief succession. One Marcella rotated its turret at the Huberts before being destroyed by a lone shot from Drusilla's Maurice II/G.

The convoy of Maurice IIs advanced past the destroyed Marcellas and joined the Huberts. Together, they drove toward the other tunnel. From her viewpoint, Drusilla observed the Huberts' designations on her camera's IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) system.

Teal-outlined diamonds appeared on the Huberts. Beside each diamond were the words 'St. Hubert II/B, 1st RGA PzDiv' in matching-colored letters.

"What's the 'Ghost Division' doing here, Drusilla?" the radio operator asked.

"They returned from the Otherworld to assist in the defense," she explained.

"Regardless," the driver added, "Let's try to stay focused."

"You said it," the gunner agreed.

Up ahead, she noticed the other MAFVs turning toward a door on their right. "Turn hard right," she told the driver.

The driver steered the Maurice II/G to the right and entered a long hallway.

On the corner of her left eye, she spotted an Underground MAFV crashing through a wall. The miniature vehicle resembled a Soviet-style KV-1C. The IFF registered a red-outlined diamond on the Underground MAFV. "St. Vladimir I/C, 21st Underground PzDiv," the IFF recorded.

She yelled, "Hostile Heavy MAFV, nine o'clock!"

The Underground Vladimir diesel engine revved as smoke poured from its rear exhaust pipe. The turret turned to the moving Maurice. It fired a projectile shell, a hopped-up variant of Semtex explosives. The shell missed the Maurice by mere inches. It instead exploded on the concrete wall, leaving behind a massive twelve-foot hole. As the Maurice rolled away, the Vladimir gave chase.

"He's closing in on us," the radio operator said.

"Driver," Drusilla called out, "Step on it!"

With the Vladimir hot on their tail, the Maurice took evasive action. Zig-zagging down a hall, the Maurice dodged the powerful shells. From behind the Vladimir, a lone RGA soldier entered the hallway from a closed door. He rushed to the enemy MAFV with a Safecracker grenade chucked it.

A laser machine gun mount on the turret's rear slew the lone Ryanite. The grenade's magnets landed on the chassis, but a concrete-like solution on the hull caused the magnets to slide off. The grenade detonated safely behind the Vladimir.

The Vladimir, undamaged, turned its turret back to the Maurice II/G up front. Drusilla's Maurice swerved to the left and rolled down another long hallway. At the other side of the hall, an air vent cover exploded. Two Luftgeschwaders emerged from the dirty smoke emanating inside the vent. The IFF identified them as St. Gandolph Ga210Gs, multirole A-Wings resembling Junkers Ju88 bombers.

The Ga210Gs fired laser cannons and launched unguided rockets at the lone Vladimir. Their combined attacks destroyed the Vladimir's treads, immobilizing it.

One laser beam managed to puncture its fuel tank, setting it ablaze. It exploded in midair after Drusilla's Maurice made a sharp right on an adjacent hall.

At the end of the hall, Drusilla spotted Ryanite Panzergrenadiers and additional Huberts, Maurice II/Gs and Louis II/As.

The Ryanite Panzergrenadiers, supported by additional Maurice IIs and Huberts, led the surviving members of Drusilla's armored convoy. Drusilla joined them. Together, they charged toward an opened door, the Maurices leading the Panzergrenadiers past two girls with handguns crouched behind a barricade of sandbags and overturned tables.

"Ingrids," exclaimed Drusilla, pointing at the Dweller armor, "One o'clock low! Take them down, gunner!"

Drusilla's gunner took aim at a solid formation of Ingrid 142s, light MAFVs patterned after the French Hotchkiss H39. He fired a careful shot, destroying one in a single direct hit.

The enemy Ingrids retaliated, shooting their own plasma cannons at the encroaching Maurices. To their supporting infantry's horror, their weaponry failed to penetrate the Ryanite armor, the rounds ricocheting and plinking. The unharmed Maurices fired back. The Ingrids were totaled and knocked-out.

With the Ingrids destroyed, the Panzergrenadiers moved in for the kill. Drusilla and the other armored units covered them. In a daring charge toward the entrenched IDA infantry, they sprinted past their armored support and closed in on the enemy. They threw antipersonnel stick grenades at the opposing force before engaging in close quarters.

Drusilla watched on as the crack Panzergrenadiers fought the IDA soldiers. She cheered for them as they fought the enemy with daggers, brass knuckles and the butts of their rifles. Before a minute passed, the Ryanites gained the upper hand, forcing the survivors to flee into the tunnels. The Panzergrenadiers gave chase, and the other MAFVs followed them. Drusilla and her crew did the same. Changing his steering, the driver floored it, propelling their Maurice at top speed.

Accardo radioed her. "Dewy-Princess, we just got new orders from High Command. Proceed to Newville Industrial Park in northwestern Wonderland."

"Has the IDA and Underground made it that far already?"

"Looks they have."

"We're heading there now."

Chapter Eighteen: Safety Deposit Boxes
(Ryanite Chorus; February 4th-10th, 2013)

"One seldom recognizes the devil when he is putting his hand on your shoulder."

-Albert Speer

Beneath the bank of Bedrock Mills, Chandler, Joseph, and the Richardson siblings had sealed themselves inside the vault. The florescent bulbs on the ceiling flickered on and off, the power supply having sustained heavy damage from the recent battle upstairs.

Jennifer slept, her body curled into a fetal position at the far right corner of the room. In the opposite corner, Chandler dozed off while sitting on the black and white tile floor, his legs spread out.

The other boys, Joseph and Percival, chatted in hushed voices in the other side of the vault. A glass table separated them from Jennifer and Chandler. "Do you think hiding in here was a great idea?" Percival asked.

"How should I know?" Joseph replied in a nonchalant tone.

Percival pointed at the air ventilation duct embedded in the ceiling above them. The steel fan behind the white mesh cover began to stop. "Cold air no longer comes down here anymore. Wondering if we're all going to slowly suffocate to death before help arrives."

Joseph tilted his chin up. "That's just the air conditioning. I'm sure fresh air from the Oxygen Recycler System is still pumped into the vault." He took a deep breath. "Otherwise, we'd be dead by now."

"How long has it been since that battle?"

"A whole week," he answered. "At the rate we're going, I fear we'll die of thirst first before suffocation."

The light fixture above the two boys burnt out, leaving half of the vault in darkness. Joseph showed him the time and date on his smartphone. A faint white glow from the screen lit up Percival's face. The time on the phone was 8:17AM.

Joseph put his phone away and made a few brief glimpses at Jennifer.

Percival grinned. "What, do you have the hots for my sister now?" He winked at Joseph and gave him a thumb's up. "I don't mind if you're discerning about marrying Jen someday."

"No. At least not yet, I think." Joseph stuttered. "I-I was…checking, checking up on her and the safety deposit boxes."

Seven hundred safety deposit boxes were housed in the vault beneath the bank of Bedrock Mills. Each box featured a pull-handle and a slot for inserting a special numbered keycard. A green light radiated above the handle and slot.

Not long after the first ceiling light died out, the other one short-circuited and gave up. Sparks flew out of the fluorescent bulb. Green dots shined like beacons inside the bank vault. The two boys crept across the room to avoid waking up the other two.

Past the glass table, all the green dots changed to flashing yellows before morphing into bright reds. The deposit boxes popped open, one after another. The noise alone failed to awaken either Chandler or Jennifer. Both were too exhausted to take notice.

The perplexed boys looked at each other, their curiosity piqued. "Ever wondered what's inside those boxes?" Joseph asked.

"I have," Percival replied. "Every Ryanite in GACSS got curious when the RGA occupied the town after some Ryanites robbed the bank last July."

"Did those guys ever manage to break into the safety deposit boxes here?"

"Time wasn't on their side. Ever before the battle, hacking into the bank's mainframe controlling the vault was next to impossible. And just like us, they also tried in vain to blow the boxes open with Semtex."

"So that's why Drusilla wanted us to stay in here," Joseph commented. "She wanted us to make sure the contents didn't fall into the enemy's hands."

"Now that the power's out," Percival added, "We don't have to deal with that computer mainframe ever again. Joe, you and I have succeeded where others have failed. And we didn't have to break a single sweat."

"Amen," Joseph agreed.

The boys rummaged through the contents of the boxes. Most of them contained stacks of Independent Dweller money and pouches of gold and silver coins, and diamonds. The valuables were the hard-earned savings of the town's former inhabitants.

Among hundreds, four stood out: safety deposit boxes '18', '412', '82', and '222'. Unlike the rest, these four were storing anything but precious valuables. Instead, the boys discovered a bizarre puzzle chock full of diabolical symbolism.

Box 18 harbored a rare, original hardcover copy of *Mein Kampf*, an imposing portrait of the *Führer* staring at the boys with fierce eyes. A paper bookmark was poking out of the book's eleventh chapter. It bore the black silhouette of a rampant hare and three Easter eggs riding on a flying saucer. On the back, someone had scribbled "Original Sin drove the guilty away from Paradise, from Eden" backwards.

412 contained a cherry-red address book, the pages listing contact information of over thirty Neo-Nazi organizations from countries like Mexico, Brazil, Russia, Iran, and Japan. Beneath the address book was a blood-stained, faded sepia-tone photograph of thirteen teenagers. Lady Ostara was shown making a mischievous grin next to three teens with the names 'Lester', 'Walther' and 'Isolde' above their heads. The others had bright red X's and a date of death between 1997 and 2005–the Rosy War years.

82 contained three colored school portraits of Harold Brotzman, Halfrida Brotzman, and Hannelore Bauer. Their initials, 'H' and 'B', were the eighth and second letters of the English alphabet. More backwards handwriting appeared in the reverse of all three. Harold's was "852 is next," Halfrida's "8192 may betray W&I," and Hannelore's "8182 strikes deal with L."

The last deposit box, 222, contained a map of a Dweller city and the farming communities and plantations along its western and northern outskirts. Joseph and Percival each held onto a side of the map with one hand.

The boys blurted, "St. Margaret's Cellar."

"Where's that?" Joseph asked Percival.

"I have no idea," Percival retorted. "Do you?"

Joseph shook his head. "Nope."

"Then we better save this stuff for Chandler, Representative Accardo and Halfrida," Percival said. "You never know, this might come in handy."

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The clock struck 9AM, as Drusilla's Maurice II/G rolled past the rubble and remains of Checkpoint Able. Other Ryanite MAFVs followed in its wake. In the ruins of Bedrock Mills, Drusilla tilted her head around to survey the destruction. Many buildings were already reduced to rubble from the recent battle. A few remained standing, having sustained various stages of damage.

In the streets, dead IDA and Underground soldiers littered the streets beside the wrecks of destroyed MAFVs and other vehicles. Fallen Ryanite troops and derelict MAFVs accompanied them. Many more were discovered in the side streets and alleys along the main road.

The IFF system on her helmet detected no signs of life. Apart from the MAFVs following her Maurice from behind, none of the Ryanite defending the town survived the battle. The same was true for the Underground and IDA soldiers who came to seize it.

Drusilla's driver called out to her. "Hey Drusilla, are you sure Chandler, Percival, Jennifer and Joseph are still alive?"

"I'm certain," she told him. "Take us to the bank and we'll find out."

The MAFV stopped on the street in front of the bank entrance. The MG34s remained mounted on their tripods, behind bullet-ridden sandbags. The roof over the front entrance had collapsed, blocking off the doorway. Across the street, her old vehicle remained in its original position, destroyed beyond repair.

Up ahead, Drusilla spotted a pickup truck arriving from the north. The truck steered away from the wrecked MAFVs and dead bodies on the road as it drove toward the bank. It parked next to the destroyed St. Louis II/A.

The driver of the truck stayed inside, the truck's engine still rumbling. The door behind the driver's seat opened. Representative Accardo jumped off the truck, smoking a Cuban cigar and wearing a pair of shaded aviator glasses. He strolled past Drusilla's MAFV, trudged up the steps and stopped between the two sandbag walls.

Drusilla adjusted the speaker attached to her helmet. "Action Andy, do you read me? It's Dewy-Princess."

Accardo reached for his two-way radio. "I hear you, Dewy-Princess." He waved at the Maurice parked in the street ahead of him. The camera inside the cupola captured the moment for Drusilla. "Is the Maurice yours?"

"It is," she informed him. "Have you managed to get in touch with Fair Knight or the others?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, I haven't." Accardo placed the radio next to his other ear. "Have you?"

"Tried three times, no response. I don't know about you, but I'm starting to wonder if they're…"

Chandler's voice blurted over thick static. "This is Fair Knight to any friendly forces in the vicinity of Bedrock Mills. My squad and I trapped ourselves inside the bank vault. Is anyone out there? Please respond, over." The message repeated.

"Sounds like an old message," Drusilla said. "You think they're still alive?"

"I'm certain," Accardo answered. He turned around and pointed at the bank entrance. "Think you can blow the entrance open for me?"

"Sure, just stand back and I'll take care of you."

Accardo rushed down the steps and ran back to the truck. He stood next to the driver's window and gave Drusilla two thumbs up.

The gunner of Drusilla's Maurice rotated the turret. He aimed the barrel of the cannon at the bank entrance and waited for the onboard autoloader to load a projectile shell. "Super Semtex shell loaded," he declared.

"Fire when ready," Drusilla retorted.

The Super Semtex shell detonated at the bank entrance upon impact. Debris from the fallen rooftop split into a thousand pieces and scattered in midair. The vibration from the explosion rocked the chassis of the Maurice. Drusilla's body shook as the Maurice absorbed the vibration.

The bank entrance was now clear. "You coming inside, Action Andy?"

"Leave it to me." Accardo put his radio away and sprinted into the building.

In the basement below the bank, the vault began to open. Light entered through the dimly lit room. Chandler, Percival, Joseph, and Jennifer shielded their eyes from the light. All four were sitting on the floor, their weapons in hand, their backs against a wall of empty safety deposit boxes.

Representative Accardo stood before them. He pulled four bottles of purified water from his satchel and smiled. "Praise the Lord that all of you are still alive."

"Likewise," Chandler replied. The four got up and walked up to Accardo. Each took a bottle and twisted the cap. Chandler tilted the bottle over his head, splashing his dirtied face with water. He wiped the water off his face. "Is Drusilla waiting for us outside?"

Accardo nodded. "She's doing well."

Jennifer sipped her bottle; Joseph took his time with his; and Percival guzzled his bottle of water. After drinking his water, Percival crushed the plastic bottle with his hands and tossed it aside. "So, did we win, Accardo?" he asked him.

"You tell me," Accardo replied.

"No, I'm asking you."

Accardo sighed. "We were victorious in preventing the Underground and IDA from seizing Wonderland. But that came with a price. Hundreds died, thousands wounded, and here comes the worst part."

"There's more?" Chandler pondered.

Joseph added, "What is it?"

"High Command has ordered us to give up Bedrock Mills to the enemy."

"They can't be serious," Jennifer said.

"A decision like that is the real deal, Jennifer. Orders are orders."

Chandler's eyes rolled. "Anthony, what's their rationale?"

"Despite the enemy's retreat," he explained, "Either through this town or in the nearby tunnels, they're just getting started. Seems like they got plans for a larger, more concentrated offensive."

"What a shame." Percival shook his head. "I can't believe we fought so hard, only to abandon Bedrock Mills." He smacked his hand against his forehead.

"This has to be a mistake." Joseph frowned.

"You're right, Joe." Chandler turned his head back to Accardo. "We've stopped them once." He nodded. "We can stop them again."

"You don't understand, do you?" Accardo raised his voice at him. "Raynerson and his Dweller allies aren't going to stop until Wonderland falls."

"So what's High Command going to do about it?"

"For now, the plan is to leave Bedrock Mills and blow the bridge on our side of the Border. I know you're all frustrated by this, but there's way too many of them. After everything that has happened, the RGA still needs all of you alive to make a difference."

Joseph and the Richardson siblings turned their backs against him. Chandler paused and pondered to himself. "If we retreat, will we retake Bedrock Mills?"

Accardo nodded. "Of course, Chandler, this town is our foot in the door to the Dweller World. This is just a temporary withdrawal."

"Fine," Chandler said begrudgingly. "We'll follow along, if it means we'll reclaim this town from the enemy."

"Someday, we will." Accardo left the bank vault. Chandler turned to the siblings and Joseph. "Come on, everyone, let's get out of here." He escorted the three out of the vault.

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(*Six days later*)

In the hallways of St. Maria Goretti, Chandler walked to the school chapel during his lunch break. He adjusted the necktie of his school uniform and opened the door. A gush of air blew past him. Peace and tranquility welcomed him. Looking over his shoulder, he strolled inside and closed the door.

Windowless and dim, the chapel set the mood meditative prayer and quiet reflections. A small steel bowl of holy water was attached to the wall on his left. Chandler dipped his fingers into the holy water, made the sign of the cross, and genuflected before crucifix behind the altar.

A bottle blonde girl was seated at a pew in front of the altar. She sat alone on the row to Chandler's right, twiddling beads of a golden heirloom rosary. Chandler walked up to pew and gazed at the left side of her face. It was Halfrida Brotzman, clad in a Bishop Dowell school uniform. She prayed with her eyes closed.

He sat beside her, made the sign of the cross, and prayed in silence. No clocks adorned the walls. In the chapel, time became a meaningless concept, the perfect getaway from the rigors of modern living.

Opening her eyes, Halfrida made the sign of the cross. She took a deep breath and turned her head left. Chandler was still praying. Halfrida cracked a smile and waited for him to finish. After he made the sign of the cross, he stared at her eyes. Halfrida blushed, her eyes fluttering.

"Didn't think I'd see you again," he spoke in a calm voice.

"Me neither," she replied. "Hunting Lady Ostara has become a full-time job."

"Accardo asked me to visit you on short notice. What's up?"

"The four boxes your fellow soldiers uncovered."

"Uh, yeah, about that…did we learn anything from those documents?"

Halfrida nodded. "All you need to know is that it's a message from my informant." She went into her handbag and showed Chandler photographs of deposit box 18. "Box 18, Box 'AH'–Adolf Hitler, signified Lady Ostara and her Conspiracy. The bookmark was her calling card."

The writing in the reverse side of the bookmark perplexed Chandler. "What does that phrase mean, Halfrida?" He pointed at the writing. "The Third Reich?"

"No," she corrected him, "A fake Catholic boarding school she and a couple old classmates of hers attended in 1944. My predecessors were ϟϟ men who ran the school as a front for superweapons research."

"I think we discussed about that a few months ago," Chandler recalled.

"So you remembered," Halfrida murmured. The next photo depicted the address book and blood stained photograph. "Box 412 symbolizes April 12th, the day me and my brother were born…and the day Ostara and her classmates 'died' at NPEA Rakonitz."

"Basically, your family helped fake their deaths and somehow aided in their escape to the Otherworld along with other Hitler Youths?" Chandler crossed his arms. "They, along with their descendants, went on to form the Remnants?"

"That's pretty much what happened to them before the Rosy War." In the middle of the blood-stained photo, she pointed at the three teenagers next to Ostara. "Lester is, of course, the Prime Minister of the Remnants. And Walther and Isolde, the Lovers, are my godparents. Not just me and Harold, but Ulrich, Heinricka, and our other six cousins."

"They got married in their teenage years?"

"It's a long story, and if I shared it with you, we'll be here until midnight." She moved on to box 82. "It's true that Harold, Hannelore and I all share the same first and last initials. But most people don't know our middle names."

"What's yours?"

"Renate. My middle initial, 'R', is the 18th letter in the alphabet. My brother's Sebastian – 'S' or 19. As for Hannelore, hers is Elvira – 'E' or 5."

The mystery behind the numbers on the back of the three photos inside box 82 clicked inside Chandler's head. Everything came together like a crackpot

conspiracy theory. The two phrases mentioning Halfrida and Harold sounded like red-herrings. The phrase 'Hannelore Elvira Bauer is next' rang alarm bells.

"Halfrida," Chandler shuddered, "Has something happened to Hannelore?"

Halfrida looked over her shoulder and whispered into Chandler's ear. "Her family reported her missing last night. The Dweller Mob kidnapped Hannelore from her family's estate as she slept."

Chandler whispered back. "The Dweller Mob?"

"Yes, Dweller organized crime. Rub shoulders with Ostara Conspiracy."

"What's Ostara got to do with this kidnapping?"

"Not long ago, she rediscovered a drug called 'D-VIII,'" Halfrida elaborated. "She then offered it to the Don of the Ludwig Crime Family, Vincent Ludwig."

He tilted his head to the side. "Isn't that the same guy who's Prime Minister of the Independent Dweller Party and ally of Emperor Raynerson?"

She nodded. "Small world we live in, huh?"

Chandler shook his head. "No, this secret world makes no sense to me. The deeper I delve into this, the more confused I become."

"Our world knows only three sides." Halfrida held up three fingers. "Those who rally around me and Harold, those who support Raynerson, and those who terrorize for Ostara. We're fighting over the Otherworld, the Dweller World, and every SSE on Earth. Everyone's just a single piece on this Grand Chessboard."

"Then why are Ostara and Ludwig doing business with D-VIII?"

"Simple, he and other wiseguys sell D-VIII for Ostara, because she promised them half of the drug sales. What I'm concerned about is the other half."

Chandler crossed his arms. "And where does Hannelore tie into this?"

"Our next clue in the Conspiracy's clandestine activities."

"Why would a girl like Hannelore Bauer be involved in any of this?"

"That's what I was thinking, Chandler." Halfrida stroked her chin. "It's bizarre enough that a major Dweller Mafia family kidnapped the heiress of Bauer Industries without mentioning a ransom. Until we get Hannelore's side of the story, something about this seems *suspicious*."

Chandler rubbed the back of his neck. "So the Nightingales are tasked with rescuing her? Accardo and I can roll with that."

"Actually, you and I, Lance and the rest of your squad are tackling this one alone. Accardo and rest of his Nightingales have other priorities."

"What kind of priorities?"

"It's involves my cousins and some computer software."

"Care to elaborate?"

Halfrida shook her head.

"Never mind," he said. "What's the plan?"

"Right about now, Lance is undercover, using his Jackbooter connections to find her true location. We'll be heading down to Florida next month to visit St. Margaret's Cellar beneath Miami."

"Telepath me if something happens." Chandler got up from the pew.

"I will." Halfrida leaped from the pew and embraced him.

The school bells rang out in the halls. Heavy chatter filled the corridor outside the chapel. The thick walls lining the chapel muffled the noise.

Chandler walked away from the pew. Before he left, Halfrida called out to him. "Wait, I forgot to tell you something."

He turned around. "Something else?"

"This summer, you and me, let's go on a vacation together."

"Are we going out on a special date?"

Halfrida blushed. "Let's just say, you'll find out when that time comes."

Chandler smiled. "Sure." He went for the door and disappeared among an oncoming crowd of students, outside the chapel.

Chapter Nineteen: Kirov Mansion (Ryanite Chorus; March 2nd, 2013)

"Shoot first and ask questions later, and don't worry, no matter what happens, I will protect you."
-Hermann Göring

St. Margaret's Cellar was a Dweller resort city many miles beneath the city of Miami. Its massive seaports attracted submersible boats carrying hundreds of passengers. Thousands of tourists from throughout the Dweller World roamed its bustling streets. A rainbow of neon lights decorated the entrances of its many casinos, nightclubs, and bars. Flamboyant gangsters in custom-tailored business suits patrolled the streets alongside the local police.

Glitz and glamor ended in the farming communities and plantations outside the city. The lights in the cavern ceiling over the farms, plantation and city were powerful enough to cultivate agriculture, including the Dwellers' most prized cash crop: Tree Caviar.

On a plateau in the western end of the cavern, a walled-off compound overlooked the local farming communities. The neon lights of St. Margaret's Cellar illuminated the cavern's entire eastern half. The plantation building, Kirov Mansion, featured Victorian architecture. Pairs of Ludwig family wiseguys patrolled in and around the compound, guarding Kirov Mansion, its drug labs, and the heiress of Bauer Industries.

Scaling the walls of the compound, Chandler climbed onto a gap in its barbed wire crown. He stood atop the wall and jumped down, landing feet first in a pool of mud. With an FG42 rifle, Chandler crept toward a thick patch of tall grass and looked into the weapon's attached scope. The scope lit up his surroundings in a greenish tint. The mansion was hundreds of yards away.

The two-way radio in a pouch attached to his bandoleer crackled. "Fair Knight," Lance's voice mumbled, "This is Siegfried. Please come in."

Chandler spoke into the radio. "Your intel is correct, Siegfried. No one's guarding my position. Tell the others to climb over the wall."

Over several minutes, Halfrida, Joseph, Drusilla, Percival, Jennifer, and Lance took turns climbing over the wall. They followed Chandler as he crawled to a field of dense foliage. Among the fields of tall grass and trees, mud and foliage concealed their black Fackelträger suits.

Halfrida lay flat on the ground beside Chandler. She scanned and studied the patrol patterns around Kirov Mansion through night vision binoculars.

Beyond the road were fields of trees, all of them arranged in columns. The bark on each tree had spores of Tree Caviar growing on them. The columns were lit by gas lanterns nailed onto study wooden stakes. Several mobsters wielding Uzis and Mac-10s patrolled the darkened fields in pairs. Each carried walkie-talkies and communicated with each other in fifteen minute intervals. The gas lanterns on the wooden stakes guided them on their nighttime patrols.

Hundreds of yards across the fields, they arrived at the mansion's perimeter. The mobsters Halfrida saw earlier were either still in their positions or followed the same patrol pattern. Several of the mansion's windows were whitened by bright lights from inside the building's many rooms. The briefest glance at the windows stung everyone's eyes, forcing them to look away.

Halfrida leaned her head next to Chandler's. "What is it?" he whispered.

She spoke into his ear. "Whatever happens, we mustn't attract too much attention until we've secured Hannelore and destroyed the drug labs."

The dirt road led to the mansion's front entrance. Gas lanterns were posted on stakes along the road to the mansion. "Right," he said, "And we shouldn't reach the mansion through the dirt road either."

"You've learned a lot since the last time I saw you." Halfrida smirked.

Chandler nodded. "I have." He crouched on the ground and crossed the dirt road with the others.

A lumbering Studebaker truck with bright headlights traveled along the road. Chandler and the others dove into the ditches lining the road. The truck passed by them and continued toward the mansion. With the truck gone, they emerged from the ditches. Chandler led the others to the detour path.

Slowly, Halfrida and Chandler slithered on the ground behind a pair of Ludwig mobsters. They stopped mere inches from the mobster's feet. Up close, Chandler caught a whiff of the cologne the mobsters wore. He and Halfrida remained still.

The two gangsters, dressed in business suits and Balaclava masks, stared at fields of trees, germinated Tree Caviar spores growing on the bark. Both wielded a Czech Škorpion submachine gun.

One wiseguy reached into his double-breasted coat, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. He placed a lone cig inside his exposed mouth and lit it with a silver flip-lighter. As he placed the lighter below the cigarette, the flame died. "Damnit," he sneered, "My lighter's out." He turned to his partner, standing beside him. "Got a light?"

"Sorry," the other replied, "I don't smoke." He offered him a flask of whiskey. "How about a drink?"

The first declined. "I can't believe we're stuck in the middle of nowhere," he complained. "Is there even a synthetic gas station where a man can get a new lighter and some smokes around here?!" He walked away from his partner.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the mansion, get another lighter."

The second wiseguy was now alone. Halfrida motioned Chandler to get up. With the enemy's back against him, he unsheathed a combat dagger and snuck up to him. He shortened his footsteps to reduce the noise he made as he closed in.

In one swift move, Chandler grabbed the wiseguy and slit his throat. He pummeled to the ground and proceeded to stab his heart five times.

With Halfrida's help, he dragged the body and hid it in the foliage.

After disposing the body, Chandler and the others advanced further into the fields. The dim lighting in the cavern ceiling overhead, coinciding with nighttime on the surface, kept them undetected in their approach to the mansion's rear.

Hidden behind a thick brush, the seven observed four wiseguys guarding the rear entrance. A rotating CCTV camera surveyed the patio and doorway. Chandler turned to the others. "On my mark, I need well-placed shots on the sentries and surveillance camera." He pointed at the targets.

Percival, Joseph, Jennifer and Drusilla targeted the sentries. The four Nightingales, armed with silenced FG42 rifles, got down on their bellies. They adjusted their firing rate to single shot. Halfrida aimed at the surveillance camera, while Chandler and Lance had the lights on the backdoor patio.

With the fingers in his hand, Chandler counted down. Five fingers, four fingers, three, two, one. "Now," he spoke, "Open fire!"

The Nightingales fired a bullet into the heads of each wiseguy. The rounds penetrated the skulls of the sentries, entering their brains, before exiting on the other side. A bullet fired by Halfrida collided with the camera, causing it to sputter and spark into disrepair. A sixth and seventh round struck the patio lights, destroying them.

Lance patted Chandler's back. "You guys rock, you know that?"

Chandler retorted, "Of course." Along with Halfrida, he and the other Nightingales approached the rear entrance, guns drawn. Lance followed in their wake. Everyone gathered around the door.

Halfrida opened the backdoor with a silencer attached to her Cz75 Tactical Sports and went inside. The foyer lights at the rear entrance showered her like a New Year's celebration at Times Square. In the hallway ahead of her, she kept her finger on the trigger.

A wiseguy exited a room with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. It was the one from earlier, having found a lighter for his cigarettes. He got confused after seeing Halfrida. "Who the hell are you?"

A speeding bullet entered his skull. Blood gushed out the wiseguy's cranium. He fell on the marble-tiled floor in a pool of his blood, his hand still attached to the new lighter.

The Nightingales prowled into the building. Lance closed the door behind them. "Thank God they're oblivious to our presence," Chandler said to Halfrida.

"Let's kill two birds with one stone." Halfrida swapped magazines. "You take Drusilla, Joseph, and Percival and rescue Hannelore. Lance, Joseph and I will destroy the D-VIII labs and then look for an escape inside the compound garage."

"Sounds like a plan."

The seven dispersed into two directions. Chandler and his group traveled up the steps of a rear stairway. Meanwhile, Halfrida escorted Joseph and Lance to another hallway that led to the mansion's basement.

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Upstairs in a candle-lit room, two mobsters in suits and Balaclavas interrogated the captive. An auburn girl with freckles, emerald and steel eyes and a

pale complexion was tied to an oak chair. Gunfire reverberated in the hallway outside, alerting Hannelore and her captors.

Several more came, this time penetrating the room. The bullets shot and killed both captors. The door was kicked opened and Chandler and Drusilla barged into the room.

Hannelore breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God you found me. I thought they were going to bore me."

Drusilla placed her index finger over her lips. "Keep your voice down." She turned to Chandler and offered him her knife. The knife had sharp edges, enough to slice through the rope. "Help me untie her."

"Then cover me." He took the knife and proceeded to cut Hannelore's binds.

Drusilla stood guard by the doorway, her silenced rifle drawn.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Chandler asked Hannelore.

Hannelore shook her head. "Who are you people?"

"Long story short, your family hired Halfrida Brotzman, who in turn persuaded us to free you."

"That's good, that's good. Are you guys RGA?"

"Yes." He worked on untying her legs after cutting the rope around her arms.

Free from her restraints, Hannelore got up and gave Chandler a big kiss on the cheek. "My family will pay you all later. Which way do we go?"

"Downstairs, to the front entrance," Chandler replied. He followed Drusilla out of the room. In the hallway, Drusilla covered the left side, while he had the right. Three wiseguys entered the hallway from the nearby stairway. On full-auto, he unloaded his gun, killing all of them.

Back in the room, Hannelore snatched a Colt Single Action Army Revolver off the corpse of one of the wiseguys. She twirled the chamber open. Inside were six .45 ACP rounds. Closing the chamber, she walked out of the room.

Drusilla glanced at the revolver she wielded. "You know how to shoot?"

"My aunt, the company's CEO, taught me," Hannelore replied.

"Interesting," Drusilla muttered.

Chandler waved at the girls. "Follow me."

The girls nodded. Chandler escorted them across the hall. At the other end of the hall was a staircase that led downstairs. He trudged down the steps. Hannelore followed. Drusilla covered the hallway. She joined them after they had traveled down half of the steps.

Downstairs, at a balcony overlooking the front entrance, the Richardson siblings took cover behind some furniture. Chandler, Drusilla and Hannelore joined them. The mobsters covering the entrance barricaded themselves with whatever furniture was present. A firefight intensified between the gangsters and the Nightingales. Hannelore ducked, bullets flying over her head.

"You must be Hannelore," Percival said to her. "I can't believe I'm meeting a celebrity for the first time. Can I have your autograph?"

"If we make it out alive," Hannelore promised.

Percival smirked. "I think I can roll with that." He took potshots at the enemy's position. Most of his shots missed the targets below. His eyes shifted between Hannelore and gangsters downstairs.

"Got any grenades, Chandler?" Jennifer patted his shoulder.

Chandler handed Jennifer an egg-shaped frag grenade. "Here," he told her, "An *Eihandgranate*. Make it count."

She nodded. Clutching the grenade in her hands, Jennifer unscrewed the blue-coated dome cap on top. She then pulled the steel cord at the bottom, activating the grenade's four-second fuse. As the grenade's fuse counted down, Jennifer lobbed it at the enemy's position. "Fire in the hole!"

The grenade spun in midair as it reached the target. It landed on the tiled floor downstairs, making a loud, metallic clunking noise. Two seconds, the grenade detonated, spewing shrapnel at the affected area. With the enemy disoriented, Hannelore and the Nightingales emerged from cover. Firing in full-auto, Chandler, Drusilla, Jennifer, and Percival sprayed the enemy with bullets. Hannelore even landed a few shots herself with the revolver.

The mobsters did not stand a chance. After slaying them, the Nightingales escorted Hannelore to the main entrance. They took positions around the late enemy's barricade. While kneeling before the twin-set of doors, Chandler told the others: "Watch my back! I'm blowing the door with C4!"

"I got your back, Chandler," Percival told him. He advised the girls, pointing at the center and left sides of the room. "Drusilla, Jen, cover that area."

The girls covered the group's other flanks. Hannelore hid behind Drusilla. Eyeing Chandler, she watched him plant and prime plastic C4 charges on the door. The young man's work, swift and calculated, lasted about two minutes, the bombs rigged to a handheld detonator.

"It's set to blow," he told the others.

The Richardson siblings helped Hannelore get back on her feet. Chandler and Drusilla ran up the stairs, retreating to the group's previous position. Hannelore and the siblings followed suit.

Chandler pressed the button on the detonator. One after another, the C4 detonated, destroying the doors. Smoke and flames lined the doorway, with distance gunfire entering the building.

Leading the way, Chandler trudged down the stairs. He ran past the doorway and dove at an abandoned car in front of him. A squad of IDA soldiers was approaching Kirov Mansion. The soldiers hurled bullets at the others as they escorted Hannelore out of the building.

Chandler returned fire. He skipped to a car on his right and continued shooting from there. Drusilla rushed to his side. She tossed two smoke grenades in front of the bullet-ridden marble fountain. White smoke billowed over the fountain, shrouding the area between the soldiers and the Nightingales.

Swarms of IDA soldiers emerged from the fields outside the mansion grounds. They fired their assault rifles and submachine guns at the Nightingales as

they advanced. Through superior numbers and firepower, they pinned Chandler and the others down.

At a garage, to the left of the fountain, the doors opened. The headlights of a vehicle lit up. It sported two wheels, treads and a Browning fifty-caliber machine gun. An M5 Halftrack rolled out of the garage and proceeded down a cobblestone road to the front of the mansion.

Percival alerted Chandler and the girls to the vehicle. "We got an enemy armored car on our three o'clock!"

Chandler glimpsed at the vehicle. "Hold on, that's an IDA halftrack!"

Hannelore pointed her revolver at it. The gun was now empty. "I'm out."

Lance emerged from the floor of the passenger compartment. He waved aloft a big flag on a study flagstaff. The flag bore the emblem of a green cross within a white cross over a blue background. A bullet from one of the IDAs left a hole in the flag.

The Nightingales spotted him and the flag. "That must be Halfrida, Lance, and Joseph," Drusilla said.

"Yeah, it is," Jennifer added.

"Halfrida's here too?" Hannelore blurted.

The halftrack stopped in front of the mansion steps. Joseph got on the .50-Cal and hurled hundreds of rounds at approaching IDAs. Lance jumped off the halftrack, rushing toward Chandler and the others while bullets whizzed past him.

"Lance," Chandler said in disbelief, "Where did you and the others…?"

He interrupted him, "There was an elevator in the basement. Halfrida, Lance and I learned that it went straight to the garage and there…."

"Save it for later." Chandler covered his mouth.

The smoke from Drusilla's smoke grenades vanished. Drusilla dug into her satchel and pulled out two more smoke grenades. Holding onto them, Drusilla chucked them over the fountain. Another blanket of smoke concealed the Nightingales' movements. She followed Chandler and the others to the halftrack.

Everyone climbed onboard and sat in the passenger benches. Lance gazed at Hannelore. "Ah, you must be Hannelore Elvira Bauer. I've heard lots of stories about you and your family."

She blushed, her cheeks reddened. "That's because we did business with the Brotzmans."

Jennifer hollered at Halfrida. "Come on, Halfrida, floor it!"

"You said it," Percival added.

Seconds later, the smoke from Drusilla's grenades dissipated. Chandler and the others sent bullets to the encroaching IDAs, keeping some of them at bay.

"Hang onto something." Halfrida reversed the vehicle and traveled in the direction she came from. She accelerated the halftrack and drove down a winding road away from the compound. At the base of the plateau, the road converged on an uncongested, multilane freeway, west of St. Margaret's Cellar.

On the road from the east, several IDA troopers riding on three jeeps were hot on their tail. The front passengers fired handgun rounds at the escaping

halftrack. Hannelore screamed at the top of her lungs. Chandler and the others shielded her, ducking their heads under the benches to avoid the incoming bullets.

A stray bullet hit the rear of the armored chassis. "Can't this thing go any faster?" Hannelore whined.

"I'm driving as fast as I can," Halfrida yelled.

"This is the fast as it will go," Lance said.

Two more bullets struck the hull. The halftrack's mounted machine gun remained unmanned. "Somebody needs to get up and use that machine gun!" Chandler shouted at the others.

Joseph volunteered. "I'll take care of it."

Jennifer tugged his arm. "Be careful," she whispered into his ear.

"I'll be fine." Joseph got up and went for the machine gun.

Chandler, Percival, and Drusilla popped out of cover and engaged the pursuing jeeps with their handguns. Most of their shots missed, but enough rounds were fired to make the soldiers stop shooting.

The jeeps continued their pursuit. Joseph manned the machine gun and cocked it. He aimed at the jeeps' engines. Everyone covered their ears. Chandler covered Hannelore's with his hands. Hannelore had both eyes closed. She moped, hoping that everything was just a terrible dream. Nobody heard her; the gunfire drowned out her voice. Joseph howled and jeered, his finger still on the trigger.

In an instant, one jeep's hood caught on fire before bursting in flames. The vehicle exploded in midair like a fireball, forcing another on its tail to narrowly dodge it. Still, with two jeeps remaining, Joseph continued firing his gun at them. Shooting at the drivers, Chandler and the others watched on as both vehicles swerved out of control before colliding into a massive explosion.

Joseph threw a clenched fist in the air. "Now that is how it's done!" On his dominant hand, he fired the gun at the cavern ceiling like a wild man. The bullets left tiny holes on the ceiling. He kept shooting until it was empty.

"Looks like I'm not the only who's excited!" Jennifer commented.

"And why shouldn't we?" Joseph hugged her.

Chandler breathed a sigh of relief. He gazed at Halfrida as she was driving the halftrack. A loud boom echoed. He looked back at Kirov Mansion.

The timed explosives Halfrida, Lance and Jennifer had planted in the mansion's basement detonated in one big fireworks show. Explosions erupted out of the building's doors and windows like a volcano. Flames engulfed the entire building in a raging inferno.

At the same time, dozens of IDA military police jeeps cruised along the road to the compound, supported dozens more city police cars from nearby St. Margaret's Cellar. The wails of their sirens bounced on the cavern walls, lights strobing in shades of red and blue.

He cracked a wide smile at everyone's handiwork. The halftrack drove into an empty tunnel, and the once imposing compound soon disappeared from sight.

J. N. ENRIQUEZ

Chapter Twenty: Drug U-Boats
(Ryanite Chorus; March 4th-10th, 2013)

"Who says you can't have fun in war?"

-Halfrida Brotzman

One morning after the Kirov Mansion raid, Halfrida and Hannelore did their makeup in front of a bathroom mirror at a hotel room somewhere in Florida. Halfrida tilted her head left and right at the mirror, looking at the acne scars on her cheeks. She applied a touch of facial concealer to hide them. Hannelore, on the other hand, worked her eyeliner and a nice dab of mascara.

"So what are you up to these days, Halfrida?" Hannelore asked. "Helping your brother run the GACSS?"

"What are you doing for GACSS?"

"Eh, I asked you first! What, did your brother not tell you about me?"

"One of my death squads just saved your Canadian bacon."

Hannelore sighed. "For over a year, I've been Harold's liaison to Bauer Industries, and doing side jobs with the Eddie Mack Trading House. Between that, my acting career, and my studies, juggling life is...well, *difficult*." She began curling her eyelashes. "Now, it's your turn."

"Me, I've been gunning, maiming, cashing, and swearing," she said. "All because of an interdimensional terrorist: this closet lesbian and Neo-Nazi who masterminded the Incident–a Columbine-style Reichstag Fire."

"Lady Ostara?" Hannelore eyed her.

Halfrida nodded. "On top of that, she stole secret Remnants superweapons projects and is now scheming to turn GACSS into the Fourth Reich. It's up to a girl like me to cut the legs of her plot."

"And that's why you're out here, instead of being with Harold?"

"Yes." Halfrida took a moment to see if her makeup blended well with rest of her skin. The concealer turned out to be a shade darker. "Great, I need to work on practicing my concealer some more."

"Let me help you." Hannelore placed her hand on the faucet's knob. Cold water descended upon the sink. She wiped and washed the concealer and other layers of makeup off Halfrida's face.

The acne scars on Halfrida's cheeks reappeared. Halfrida watched Hannelore apply a new layer of concealer over another layer of moisturizer. "Where was I?" She snapped her fingers. "Yeah, that's pretty much the gist of my story thus far. What else have you been doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let me rephrase that." She paused as Hannelore finished applying makeup on her right cheek. "What do you plan to achieve in life?"

"Climbing to the top of the corporate ladder," Hannelore said. "I'm the prominent heiress in my family's business, and I intend to keep it that way." She

rolled her eyes. "But why do you want to know, Halfrida? You and your brother are already on the top of the world anyway."

Halfrida blushed. "Is that flattery I hear?"

She shook her head. With Halfrida's makeup done, Hannelore returned to curling her eyelashes. She took a minute to look at her eyelashes.

"I don't know about you, but nobody goes around rebuilding Wonderland, landing cushy auditions in Hollywood films, and then cozy up to my brother. Stuff like that happens because somebody's trying to make a lasting impression."

"What are you trying to say?" Hannelore asked.

"Ask Chandler, Lance, or Drusilla: all of them are working alongside me for a reason. Me? I'd like to learn more about you, that's all."

"Look, I'm no fan of sharing family matters with other people, Halfrida." Hannelore tossed the eyelash curler into a small pouch next to the sink. She grabbed a hot curling iron resting next to the sink.

The muffled voices of Chandler, Lance and Percival could be heard beyond the bathroom door. Neither of the girls cared to listen to them. "Nothing's personal in this secret world of ours," Halfrida said. "You're miles away from home and caught in the middle of my war. We're all friends in this, Hannelore."

She pointed at her chest. The grip on the curling iron was wrapped around her other hand. "You promise you won't tell anyone?"

"As long you don't tell anyone about my relationship with Chandler."

"Okay." Hannelore curled her hair as she spoke. "I have a little sister back home, someone that the Paparazzi don't have a huge hard on for."

"What's her name?"

"Ingeborg," she replied. "My family and I just call her 'Inge.' She's a genius and an immature oddball. She and I are competing over who gets to inherit the family business, since the other Bauer children aren't all that interested." Her hair curled, she offered the curling iron to Halfrida. "You want it?"

Halfrida held out her hand. "I'll take it." The curling was placed next to the sink. She took it and curled her bleach blonde hair. "You were saying?"

"Trouble is, I don't think she's capable of running Bauer Industries." She pointed at the ceiling. *Brotzmanskrieg* is like my one-way ticket to the top."

"You sound like Inge is your archrival, not your sister."

"Our parents raised us to be competitive businesswomen, Halfrida. It's something that you and your brother aren't capable of understanding." She turned to her. "You and Chandler are dating? Neither of you don't appear to be."

"I'm too concerned about my brother, while Chandler is stuck discerning over dating me and being a priest," Halfrida said. "I feel like my brother's needs are preventing me from dating Chandler. Do you have any advice, Hannelore?"

Hannelore's shoulders rose. "There's not much I can do to help you with dating. I'm not friends with Chandler, so I don't know a lot about him, other than he's a nice guy and all. You're better off finding someone else."

"I see," Halfrida muttered.

"By the way, you still want me to accompany you guys to Setonburg?"

"Of course," she replied. "You stumbled across one of their drug storehouses while running errands for Eddie Mack a few weeks ago, right?"

Hannelore nodded.

"Do you still remember where you last saw them?"

"It's either the docks of New Hope or Setonburg."

"Then let's get the show on the road." Halfrida went for the door.

"What about school or my acting career?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll pull some strings and make a few arrangements as compensation for agreeing to lead us to these storehouses." She opened the door and left the bathroom. "In exchange, take care of Chandler for me."

Hannelore shut the bathroom lights off and returned to the others.

***

(*Five days later*)

"That's everything Halfrida said before she left us last week," Hannelore said to Chandler. "Just those words: 'take care of Chandler for me.'"

"And she didn't bother to say goodbye before leaving that hotel room." Chandler shook his head. "She could have at least told me where she was going."

Chandler, Hannelore, and the others were seated on the edges of a stolen IDA naval patrol boat. A Remnants frogman, dressed in a white and blue sailor uniform, piloted the boat. The boat traveled up a long, wide, watery cavern called the 'Waters of Rebirth'. Thousands of miles long, hundreds of miles wide, Rebirth Waters divided the entire Dweller World in half.

Boats, from simple rowboats to massive ships thousands of feet long, roamed this area. Entire schools of fish swam in its waters. Several Dweller cities were settled along the western and eastern banks of the Waters of Rebirth. Each one featured adjacent harbor and commercial dock full of ships and nautical personnel.

"Perhaps she had a reason," Percival commented.

"What reason could Halfrida have?" Chandler questioned. "She refused to answer and instead got angry at all of us for just asking. Then she ran out of the room in a hurry." He faced Hannelore. "Are you sure she didn't you tell anything else in the bathroom?"

Hannelore shook her head.

Chandler spoke to his squad members. "Does anyone here have a single clue where she could have gone?"

"We know Representative Accardo and the rest of the Nightingales are in Mothers Den." Drusilla pointed at the Dweller city's shipyard, hundreds of miles to the east. A few ships, football fields in length, were moored at the shipyard.

Joseph, oblivious to the conversation, whistled at the size, scale, and depth of the cavern housing the Waters of Rebirth. "Man, this place is huge!" The ships impressed him even more. "How the hell did they build those?"

The others ignored him as they talked to one another.

Jennifer snickered. "It's possible she made her way there," she told Chandler.

"Then we need to go there now." Chandler hollered at the Remnants frogman. "Hey, could you take us to the shipyard of Mothers Den?"

"*Nein*, Herr Martinsen," the frogman responded.

Lance placed his hand on Chandler's shoulder. "Are you worried about her? These past few days, you haven't been able to get her off your mind."

"She's all I can think about, Lance," Chandler said. "I have a bad fielding about this mission."

"A little too late for that, you know? Should've spoken up earlier, back when we at that one Dweller city beneath Louisiana." Lance slammed a load box magazine into his G43 semi-auto rifle, cocking it. "Just try your best on staying focused. I know she's not here with us anymore, but we're all counting you to guide us out of here alive."

Hannelore added, "Think of this as an opportunity to impress her, Chandler. After all, we all know she's quite fond of large explosions."

"When you put it that way, Hannelore," Chandler told her, "I think I'll be fine as long as I'm doing everything for Halfrida's love."

"That's the spirit." She clapped her hands.

The frogman anchored the boat next to a concrete pier on the port side. He turned around to address the Nightingales and Hannelore, seated in the benches behind him. "*Wilkommen in Setonburg*," he declared. "I'll be waiting for you at a pier in the docks outside New Hope to the south."

Chandler asked, "What do want us to do once we completed our objectives?"

"Just say the word, and I'll meet you here in ten minutes. Sounds fair?"

He got up and shook his hand. "Sounds fair to me," he smiled.

The nights of *Brotzmanskrieg* felt long. They felt even longer in the Dweller World, with IDA-controlled areas enforcing strict curfews all over its many cities and towns. At Setonburg Harbor, IDA military police patrolled the facility with patrol dogs. Searchlights, mounted on guard towers, casted light over critical hotspots. Torpedo speedboats sailed up and down the Waters of Rebirth, looking for amphibious intruders.

On the concrete platform, Chandler waved at his squad. "Follow me," he whispered. "And try not to let them know we're here."

They crept up the stairs and stopped at a stack of crates and containers, a couple yards west of the pier. A searchlight rotated towards them. Everyone ducked as the light shined over their heads. They reemerged from cover.

With a pair of binoculars, Chandler observed and studied the nearby surroundings. Numerous commercial boats and other vessels were docked at Setonburg Harbor, their crews in their bunks catching shuteye. Further up the harbor were several warehouses guarded by IDA military police.

At a brick building with a white '8' on the wall, a truck parked at a loading yard. The driver and front passenger, clad in formal business attire and fedoras, jogged to the back of the vehicle. They opened a door to the back. From a large door behind the truck, several dock workers appeared. They were accompanied by armed Dwellers wielding Thompson submachine guns on one hand.

Chandler passed the binoculars to Hannelore. She gazed at the scene ahead.

The dock workers unloaded wooden crates from the truck. They hauled the crates into the building. The truck drove away after all the crates were offloaded. "Those guys have to be Ludwig's men," Hannelore said to him.

"Are you sure that's the same warehouse you stumbled into?" Chandler gestured at it. "We went around in circles back at New Hope earlier."

"This has to be the one, Chandler."

"Now we just have to look for the two jet black submarines you mentioned last week." He scanned the harbor. "Do you the *Lenin* and the *Kalinin*?"

Hannelore observed the moored ships to the north. All of the ships were civilian freighters, yachts, and small fishing boats. Further up north was an IDA naval shipyard, where submarines, corvettes, destroyers, cruisers, battleships and even aircraft carriers were moored for the night. Even from a distance, the breadth and size of the installation, coupled with the ships, made it appear huge.

Less than a mile away, she spotted a pair of submarines was anchored next to each other, separated by a concrete pier. The ships' periscopes protruded halfway from the bridges above their hulls.

"Found the ships yet?" Chandler whispered.

"I did." She returned the binoculars to him. "They're both moored in these docks. Ludwig's men will be loading their cargo bays with crates full of D-VIII soon. We better move now, or we risk alerting the garrison inside the city."

Lance crouched behind them. "What's the plan, Chandler?"

"First, we need to…what the hell?"

Throughout the harbor and the city proper, air raid sirens wailed into the dimmed ceiling above Rebirth Waters.

"Were we spotted?"

"Doubtful," Lance said.

Percival pointed at the ceiling. "Look, up there."

Everyone tilted their chins upward.

"Whoa," Joseph whispered.

Formations of lumbering A-Wing bombers and fighters flew overhead. The big ones were Ryanite St. Blaise Bl303 bombers, twin-engine A-Wings modelled after Heinkel He111H. Squadrons of St. Francis Fr100J fighters, miniaturized Messerschmitt Bf109Gs, escorted the bombers to their targets. All A-Wings sported green and blue crosses on their wings and fuselages.

Hannelore gazed at the A-Wings. "Why are they here?"

"They look like they're on a bombing mission," Chandler said.

As the sirens continued, military police abandoned their guard duty. They ran to nearby FlaK and AA gun positions, both in the harbor and in the city itself. Tracer fire lit up the dim, damp cavern ceiling.

The dock workers and gangsters at warehouse eight ran out of the building. They rushed away from it and proceeded to an air raid shelter inside another building west of the warehouses. With the IDA garrison preoccupied and the gangsters gone, the Nightingales advanced toward warehouse eight. Chandler led them to the vicinity of the warehouse.

On the road to the warehouse, they encountered a gangster. He was kneeling on the ground, tying his shoelaces, unaware of the Chandler approaching him from behind. Chandler grabbed the man, holding him hostage. The others escorted them to a dark alley. "W-what…the hell…?" the mobster groaned.

"I need some information," Chandler snarled. "What's inside the warehouse with the number eight?"

"Why should I tell you?" he scoffed. "You're not even supposed to be here!"

The sharp blade of a knife was placed on the gangster's smooth neck. "Tell me now, or else I'll slit your throat."

"Okay, okay." The gangster caved in. "I'll tell you. Just don't kill me?"

"Start talking."

"The joint's loaded with boxes of D-VIII. The Don demanded us to deliver a shipment to a new buyer in Guatemala. That's all I know, I swear!"

Hannelore stood behind Chandler. "Make him sing like a canary."

"The personnel onboard the *Lenin* and *Kalinin* are not here right now," the gangster added. "They will be fueled and ready to go by tomorrow morning."

"That's all I need to hear," Chandler whispered. "Sleep tight." He pistol whipped the mobster with his Mk22, knocking him unconscious. With the enemy on the ground, Chandler and his crew infiltrated the warehouse.

Inside, the Nightingales found the facility abandoned by the retreating gangsters. Their merchandise remained on the huge shelves that lined the interior. A small office was found on the other side of the building.

A crate was left on the floor next to the office, a crowbar leaning next to the doorway. Chandler grabbed the crowbar and pried the crate open. After opening it, he rummaged through the contents. Dozens of large transparent bags containing a cherry-red powder were packed into the box. "This is pure grade D-VIII," he whispered to himself.

The others rallied around him. He got up and turned to them. "This is it, everyone: let's tear this place down. Find a suitable place to set the bomb charges."

"What about the bombers?" Hannelore asked.

"What about them?"

"Do you think this place is one of their targets?"

"Hannelore, we don't know for certain if this building is one of their targets. Just in case, let's wire this place to blow."

"I guess you have a point."

He addressed the others. "Once everyone's done, meet outside at the loading yard entrance."

The Nightingales and Hannelore fanned out and searched for key-structural points. For each one encountered, they left behind a pack of C4 charges. The bombs were rigged to go off all at once with the push of a detonator's button. After prepping the building, they returned to the loading yard door.

Chandler was waiting for them. "Do we still have enough for the ships?"

"Plenty more to go, Chandler," replied Percival.

"Let's hurry then," Joseph said.

They fled the building. More Bl303 bombers approached Seton Harbor from above. Bomb bays opened when the bombers reached the harbor. Dozens of bombs landed all over the harbor. One bomb exploded near the fuel tanks at warehouse fourteen, across from the submarines' piers. Gasoline leaked out of the steel tank, the flames generated by the explosion ignited them into a hellish inferno.

Everyone raced to the pier between the *Lenin* and the *Kalinin*.

In the pier, Chandler pointed at Drusilla and the two siblings. "You three take care of the *Lenin*. Joseph, Lance, Hannelore and I got dibs on *Kalinin*."

Drusilla nodded. "We'll do what we can."

"Do we need to worry about anyone onboard?" Jennifer asked.

"If what that gangster from earlier said is true," Chandler said, "This should be a cakewalk. Hurry, we don't know how long this air raid will end."

"Catch." Percival tossed a rucksack full of C4 charges at Chandler.

Chandler caught the rucksack's straps with both hands. "Thanks Percival."

The Richardson siblings and Drusilla crossed a steel-grated bridge connecting the *Lenin* to the pier. Chandler and the rest of the squad jumped onto the *Kalinin*.

The Nightingales climbed up a ladder to the bridge and slid down another ladder to enter the command room in the center of the ships' hulls.

In the *Kalinin*, the command room housed the brains of her crew. There were more red lights mounted on the ceiling of the cramped compartment than in the corridors of a Dutch brothel.

"Thank God nobody's home." Hannelore smiled.

"That just means the rest should be easy as Pi," Lance said.

Joseph surveyed the compartment. "Where do we go next, Chandler?"

Chandler paced to both ends of the room. Towards the bow, he squatted in front of a small hatch. "With something this small and unsophisticated, I'd say we plant the C4 in the engine and torpedo rooms." He twisted the red round wheel on the hatch counterclockwise, opening it.

"Will that be enough?" Hannelore asked.

"It should." Chandler left a few blocks of C4 on the floor before crawling into the bow crew quarters. "Hey Joe, could you do me a favor? Take care of the engine room for us."

"You got it." Joseph retrieved the C4 from the floor and went into the stern crew quarters behind the command room.

Hannelore and Lance followed Chandler to the bow. The bunks beds in the crew quarters, now devoid of personnel, lacked bedding and pillows. Even the adjacent officer's quarters, at the other end of the compartment, looked empty. The three scurried down a long corridor, passing by the radio room and galley. At the end of the corridor was a door with a red round wheel.

Opening the door led them to one of the onboard storage rooms. The storage room near the bow was packed with stacks upon stacks of crates containing D-VIII. The stacks turned the entire room in a small maze. Beyond the maze was a door to the torpedo room.

Torpedoes were stored on racks that took up both the right and left sides of the bow. Chandler glanced at the torpedoes. "These should be good places to set the charges." He settled the rucksack on the ground. "Help me out, you guys."

Hannelore and Lance nodded. Each removed four large blocks of C4 and planted them on the torpedoes. From the ones up front, Chandler planted his and rigged them to a separate detonator. He worked his way down to the ones Hannelore and Lance had planted for him.

Chandler wiped the sweat rolling down his forehead. The lack of air conditioning left air inside the submarine humid and musty. "That's the last of them. Let's get out of here while there's still time."

They returned to the bridge and rejoined the others at the pier. Chandler spoke to Drusilla. "Is the *Lenin* rigged to blow?"

"Ready," Drusilla replied.

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With their objectives secured, Chandler radioed the frogman to pick them up. The Nightingales sprinted back toward their insertion point and escaped onto the boat. The boat sped away from Setonburg Harbor.

Chandler hands were wrapped around the detonators. He pushed the red buttons on both detonators at the same time. "The RGA sends its regards!"

Off to the distance, the *Lenin* and *Kalinin* erupted in one gigantic explosion. The force generated by the C4 spewed both ships' debris all over the harbor, on the water, and at other ships. Seconds later, the bombs inside the warehouse exploded, destroying its foundation. The building collapsed under its weight, leaving behind a cloudy pillar of smoke.

A minute passed. Another wave of Ryanite bombers soared above the harbor. They delivered one last payload of bombs over the entire harbor. The bombs, falling in midair, separated into eight smaller bomblets. They exploded across a wide area. Buildings, MAFVs, soldiers, and ships were leveled.

The entire harbor, and city standing behind it, was engulfed in flames. Black smoke enveloped the city from burning buildings. Tracer rounds from AA guns continued ascending upward, as IDA air defenses protected the city.

He cracked a smile in admiration of the destruction he had witnessed. The boy's heart ached for Halfrida's attention, her love, her hand in marriage. The bombings reminded him how much he wanted to be with her again.

Wind breezed through the cavern from the far north. It traveled along Rebirth Waters. The boat rocked up and down as it sailed south.

Lance approached the frogman. A rough tidal wave struck the boat. Gallons of water splashed him and the others. One pace forward, he slipped and fell face first on the slippery floor.

The Richardson siblings helped him up. Another wave of water splashed them and the others. "What do you want to say to him?" Percival asked.

"Where we were heading," he replied.

Jennifer told him, "To Kendall."

"Kendall," Lance pondered, "You mean that small port town south of Mothers Den on the eastern bank?"

The siblings nodded.

"Why are we heading there?"

"To pick up Representative Accardo and the other Nightingales." Jennifer gazed at the time on a wristwatch. "It's almost midnight, so we should expect to be at the town piers soon."

Thirty miles south of the burning city, a squad of IDA patrol boats zoomed away from nearby New Hope. Squads of IDA soldiers raced to three piers. They fired their guns at the escaping boats. Three Fr100Js strafed the piers. All six of their laser machine guns roared at the enemy soldiers. Red hot beams ripped through Dweller flesh, turning some into Swiss cheese. One beam tore a soldier's arm in half, blood spewing out of his wound.

A new wave of Ryanite Bl303s converged on the city of New Hope. Just like Setonburg, the Ryanites bombers unleashed their payload upon the city and its harbor. Everything reduced to rubble. Smoke and fire plumed over the building, tracer fire rising to the ceiling.

The escaping patrol boats were manned by Remnants frogmen. They traveled across the Waters of Rebirth to the port of Kendall on the eastern bank. Chandler's boat joined the others.

Several Studebaker trucks in various states of damage parked behind the piers. Representative Accardo and the rest of the Nightingales got out of the trucks and ran to the piers. They jumped onto the other patrol boats as the Remnants frogmen dropped the anchors.

Accardo leaped into the boat Chandler and the others were on. He got himself wet while lying flat on the floor of the boat's passenger compartment. Lance and Hannelore helped him get back on his feet.

The boats, brimming with Nightingales, sailed away from the town piers. They traveled south in hopes of escaping through the mouth of Rebirth Waters in Louisiana and into the Gulf of Mexico.

Chandler saluted him. "We're back," he greeted. "It's good to see you again."

"Likewise, Chandler." Accardo shook Hannelore's hand. "Ms. Bauer, it's an honor to meet the legend in person."

"You are also a living legend, Representative," she said. "Your exploits in the RGA travel far and wide in the Dweller World and Otherworld."

Accardo whispered into Chandler's ear. "Earlier, I received a radio message from Halfrida."

"What did she say?" he whispered back.

"To meet up with her again at Orlando, Florida, in June. She also said to bring the rest of your squad with you."

"Why did she tell you that?"

"Something about hurrying over to a Teleportation Transponder east of Mothers Den, and destroying some IDA outpost for her brother and his cronies."

Chandler grinned. "Regardless, thanks for the message, Accardo."

Part Three: Das Schweigen der Brotzmans

(Silence of the Brotzmans)

Chapter Twenty One: Economic Terrorism (Ryanite Chorus; May 5th-June 14th, 2013)

"The purpose of terrorism is to terrorize."

-Vladimir Lenin

National insecurity was the new normal at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Harold and Halfrida's yes-man inside the White House, President Howard Wolff, made the place as quiet and meditative as a Benedictine monastery. The President was never inside the Oval Office. Yet First Lady Maple Wolff always entertained foreign dignitaries, tourists, school children, and other guests who visited the complex.

June 14. America's closest secrets, the cyber Holy Grail, were housed inside a non-descript janitor's closet across the hall from the Situation Room. The closet was always closed and locked behind a keypad lock that only members of the President's National Security Council knew.

Inside, the room was dark and lifeless. Central mainframes lined against walls, clicking and ticking. Monitors flickered to life. A laser grid mounted on the ceiling, walls, and floor deterred potential intruders. A computer mounted atop a desk on the other side of the room, behind it stood a glass wall that obstructed access to that side. A locked glass door stood in the middle of the glass wall.

The computer at the desk flickered to life. The monitor glowed in the darkness. Onscreen, the cursor moved and hovered over a desktop icon for the 'Federal Computerized Information Management System' (FCIMS). The cursor double-clicked it and ran the program. An unauthorized user had accessed the computer from an unknown location.

White text was typed out on a bright blue background. It ran: *WELCOME USER TO THE FEDERAL COMPUTERIZED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (FCIMS)! VERSION 5.21. COPYRIGHT 1982. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. FEDERAL LAW PROHIBITS UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS AND/OR DISCLOSURE OF THIS SOFTWARE. UNAUTHORIZED USE AND/OR DISCLOSURE WILL RESULT IN FEDERAL PROSECUTION, IMPRSIONMENT AND/OR DEATH. PROCEED AT YOUR OWN PERIL.*

Meanwhile, in the State Chancellor's office, Cousin Heinricka sat cross-legged on Harold's leather desk chair, hunched in front of Harold's PC. Halfrida and Cousin Ulrich hovered behind her. They watched SuperEnigma.exe install a backdoor into the White House's copy of the FCIMS software, shown as a pop-up window with a progress bar filling up.

"I can't believe we managed to get our hands on this," Heinricka said.

"Francine got herself six tons of D-VIII," Halfrida spoke, "While we got this software and economic freedom. The offices of the Young Christian Health Society (YCHS) won't even know what hit them."

Heinricka swiveled the chair around like a small child. The progress bar on the pop-up window stalled as the computer processed the data at full power. Halfrida stopped the chair from spinning any further. A dizzy Heinricka swayed her body left and right.

"Francine got this from the YCHS offices in Washington?" Halfrida asked.

"Ja, that's right," Ulrich answered. "Just don't ask what she had to do in order to help us steal the software."

"Remind me again why we're snooping around US government servers under the President's name?" Halfrida voiced.

"SuperEnigma is where every SSE sells its Anomalies to the outside world." Ulrich stroked his chin. "If our discovery at Other-Peoria and Francine McAdams' testimony are correct, this should bring us closer to our next lead."

The monitor blinked to black as SuperEnigma converted FCIMS to run on full screen settings. A pinging noise from the speakers bounced on the walls of the State Chancellor's office. A cyan-colored start-up screen appeared. A popup window with two bars, one for username, another other for password, appeared onscreen. Below it were three bars labeled 'ENTER', 'HELP', and 'QUIT', along with three checkmarks.

Heinricka laid her fingers on the keyboard and typed out President Wolff's username and password. Black dots appeared on the two bars as she went. When she finished, she hovered the cursor over the 'ENTER' bar and clicked it.

"We better destroy the data hard drives on Harold's PC," Ulrich suggested. "I don't want to be spending another fifteen minutes watching a blue screen, living in absolute paranoia or else imprisoned in this country."

"Good idea." Halfrida nodded her head. "I don't understand computers, which could be the reason why I've never used social media in my whole life."

"No wonder why you don't understand me!" Heinricka shivered. "Where have you been my whole life?" She embraced Halfrida.

Ulrich made a mental note to himself. *Cousin Harold needs to remind his sister about this software again in the next novel.* He shrugged his shoulders. "Are we in?" He glanced at the monitor from over Heinricka's shoulder.

"Not yet," Heinricka replied, pointing at an onscreen loading bar filling up. A white checkmark appeared. "Okay, we're in."

SuperEnigma snatched and generated a long list of accessible servers on the monitor. Each server contained sensitive databases pulled from the White House computer inside the janitor's closet, data packets organized into relevant government agencies, departments, administrations, offices, and contractors.

The first servers at the top of the list belonged to the American intelligence community. Halfrida placed her hand over the mouse and moved the scroll wheel down. Databases from the FBI, CIA, DEA, NSA, DIA, DARPA, State Department, Federal Reserve, Securities and Exchange Commission, and the National Reconnaissance Office.

Various servers connected to America's armaments companies. "Wow." Ulrich whistled, gazing at the screen. "Look at all these companies…Lockheed-

Martin, Northrop-Grumman, General Electric, General Dynamics, SAIC, Boeing…isn't that, like, the whole American military-industrial complex?"

"'Military-industrial complex'…!" Halfrida shrieked in terror. "Where have you learned such naughty words?"

"Fake News." Ulrich shirked.

Halfrida shoved a bar of soap into his mouth. "There!"

"That's so true," Heinricka giggled. "It's almost kind of scary how she's less biased than CNN or Fox News…" She too received her own bar of soap from Cousin Halfrida.

"One for you as well!" Halfrida returned to the monitor.

Heinricka and Ulrich removed the bars of soap from their mouths.

A few servers connected the cousins to some unclassified and even secret research conducted by scientists at Los Alamos, Sandia, Oak Ridge, and Brookhaven Labs. "What the Hell…," Heinricka mumbled. "Look at this!" She clicked on the Oak Ridge link. "Why would the US military be interested in medical correlations between chain-smoking, alcoholism, and homosexuality?"

"'Don't ask, don't tell'…" Halfrida chuckled. She backed out of the Oak Ridge servers and continued scrolling down the generated list, still searching for the Mad Hatter and the Queen of Hearts at the bottom.

The list became less strange. Automated high frequency trade yields, backed by Anomalies, in the quadrillions of dollars. A broadband 4G network broadcasted smartphone signals on the Moon. Somebody played Farmville somewhere in outer space. The Underground harvested raw minerals from asteroids orbiting around Mars. And some hot naked pictures of Lady Ostara.

"Are we lost?" Ulrich voiced.

"I think so," Heinricka said.

Halfrida scrolled back to the beginning. The deepest part of the rabbit hole was not at the bottom, but instead at the very top. A search into lobbying groups found a Cross Financial Unlimited bank account with the name 'M. Yass'. Halfrida opened up the account. The account belonged to Virgil Sapienti, noting his many financial transactions since he opened it two years ago.

Minutes of searching brought the cousins to a secret email account owned by Virgil. An unopened email appeared at the top of the inbox section. Halfrida moved the mouse over the email and opened it. SuperEnigma decrypted FCIMS' built-in encryption mechanisms to recover the message. It was an email between Virgil and a girl named Julie Mays.

"So my next door neighbor during my childhood was one of Lady Ostara's spies," Halfrida muttered under her throat.

"What are you talking about?" Ulrich cocked his head to the side.

"Read *Fame and Honor* and you'll know what I mean," Halfrida grinned. "'The Fascist devil is in the details', just as you said back in the Crossfront Coup." She turned away from the monitor and eyed Ulrich. "I honestly think Ostara was in this country during the Incident."

"But Cousin Ulrich has a habit of trying to be right." Heinricka rolled her eyes. "The Author created him to remind everyone to stay on script."

The cousins returned to the email. *Wise Man's subdermal implant should be working at 45.6% efficiency. The signal is pretty wonky, and I can't be sure if this plot element is even relevant, but what the hell. Just tell Ostara that our plans for next year may not succeed, even with the implant*, the email read.

"Why am I not surprised?" Halfrida called out.

"You…saw this coming?" Ulrich's nose crinkled. "Couldn't you have told me and Heinricka about this much sooner?"

"And expect me to provide you with some corroborative evidence or risk being called a conspiracy theorist?" Halfrida quipped, shaking her head. "How am I supposed to prove the storyline of *The Manchurian Candidate*? All I had for the past year or so regarding this is just a hunch, a suspicion."

"Regardless, all we need to do is to find some evidence to back up that speculation," Heinricka said, uncrossing her legs.

"By 'we', that means you and your boyfriend, Halfrida," Ulrich told her.

"Isn't that the obvious?" Halfrida sighed.

"I guess." Ulrich scratched his head. "*Verdammt*, if there's any truth to that email, it's enough cause for concern."

"Yeah, but that's, like, the least of my concerns." Halfrida shrugged her shoulders. "Lady Ostara may have my brother by the balls–and yes, he has balls and a penis. That's proof!" She cracked a smile. "See, Duchess Perpetua is still touting the conspiracy theory that Harold's a girl and I'm a boy!"

"To be honest, you do act like a boy and vice versa for Harold sometimes," Heinricka snickered.

"*Natürlich*," Ulrich laughed. "As if we needed any more proof of that!"

Heinricka leaned back in the swivel chair and stretched her arms out. "Anyhow, isn't there lots of stuff we're supposed to elaborate for the readers', Ulrich?" She folded her arms and turned her head toward his. "Or should we devote the rest of this chapter to Fake News and *Peace Through Strength*!?"

"Let's devote the rest of this chapter to Fake News. Besides, the readers' would like to know what else was missing from that newsreel back in Chapter 15." Ulrich whipped out his satphone and dialed Fake News' number. He stayed on the line, waiting for America's favorite Californian valley girl.

"We should all go on a summer vacation," Heinricka voiced. "You have to be a realist when you're dealing with terrorists and other non-state actors. I'm sure the government can take over while we're gone."

"Who says you can't have fun in war?" Halfrida winked. "After all, the War on Terror is technically World War II under a new name."

Heinricka snapped her fingers. "*Ganz genau*!"

Fake News greeted Ulrich over the satphone. "Did everyone miss me?"

"Hallo da, Fake News!" Ulrich greeted her. "Please come over to the State Plaidstadt ASAP! 'Show, don't tell' the readers to death with another newsreel! Take over the whole plot of this story for us!"

THE PLAID DREAM

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(*One month earlier*)

May 5. Across the from the State Chancellor's office, the student camera crew of *Peace Through Strength!* visited the cousins from their school, St. Eustace Catholic High School for Girls. Three sisters in school uniforms named Columbia, Virginia, and China. Form-fitting brown jumper dress with diamond-shaped emblem on left breast, white blouse sporting short puffy sleeves, brown tights and oxfords. Every Ryanite knew them as 'Real News', 'Good News', and 'Fake News' respectively.

Fake News fiddled with her golden necktie as the narrator of *The Plaid Dream*. She hooked up a teleprompter on the far-left side of the room. Real News held a bulky camera on her shoulders, the lens pointed at the Brotzman cousins. Good News swayed a boom pole left and right over the desk.

The Faggioli sisters filmed the cousins at one of their rare, classified meetings together. This segment, however, was censored and then removed from the official newsreel before released to the Ryanite public.

Halfrida presided at the right hand of Harold at his desk. Neither twin was crossdressing in their Bishop Dowell uniforms. Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka, dressed in Neumann-Seton uniforms, stood on his left.

On the desk, the Brotzman cousins rolled out a large political map of the North American continent, American states and Canadian provinces redrawn along Catholic diocesan lines. From a drawer in his desk, Harold grabbed a tin box of wax pencils and settled it atop the desk. He and his cousins shaded various dioceses and archdioceses in blue, red, green, orange, yellow, and brown. Each color denoted GACSS, Underground, and others.

Ulrich spoke into Harold's ear. "RGA troops will win major victories in the Otherworld. By summer's end, our claimed territories will be annexed." He picked up a black wax pencil and circled the following areas in Eden: Other-Minnesota, Other-Iowa, Other-Missouri, Other-Wisconsin, Other-Illinois, Other-Indiana, Other-Ohio, Other-Pennsylvania, Other-Maryland, Other-Delaware, Other-Washington DC, and Other-Virginia.

"Don't forget these locales, Cousin." Heinricka snatched a blue pencil and drew a star next to Other-Florida and Other-New Jersey. She gestured at Other-New Jersey. "We recently recaptured it from the *Christus Rex* Armored Corps."

She pointed at Other-Florida. "And Cousin Halfrida has plans there for Operation Duchesne: the seizure of Other-Florida in Eden, as well as Dweller cities and SSEs in Florida itself."

"You're still obsessed with your 'big gun?'" Harold asked his sister.

Halfrida grinned. "Why not?" She laughed. "The *Halfrida Brotzman Geschütz* will be the superweapon that'll help us win Brotzmanskrieg."

Harold waved his black wax pencil across the map. "Although the 'Four Year Plan' will provide GACSS access to lucrative SSEs, we have a *problem*." He glanced at the southern US states with magnifying glass. "The 'Fellowship of Young Christians' (FYC) is using the YCHS to strong-arm entire SSEs."

"What are they planning, State Chancellor?" Halfrida asked.

"The 'Plaid Prohibition,'" replied Harold. "FYC wants all junk food banned from America's school systems. In Washington DC, their plan hovers around the corridors of Capitol Hill as the 'Kohler Act'. This summer, Congress is on the verge of passing it."

"Is there any way we can change the government's mind?" Heinricka cried.

Harold shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"First of all," Ulrich questioned, "What exactly is the Kohler Act?"

"The Kohler Act serves one underhanded purpose, Cousin," Harold explained. "It will introduce chaos and turmoil in America's SSEs."

"That's supposed to be a bad thing?" Heinricka's nose crinkled.

"Yes," he answered. "Sugar and salt are big commodities among Jackbooters. If banned, production centers at various schools across the country will be out of commission or else outsourced to centers in Underground or FYC hands. Demand will outpace supply. And if that happens, lots of Jackbooters will be out of business, which translates to a lot of businesses to buy."

"Textbook economic terrorism," Halfrida grinned, arms crossed.

Harold, Ulrich, and Heinricka tilted their heads at her.

"Think about it," she told them. "GACSS has a vested interest in those commodities, in addition to Anomalies, Catholic paraphernalia, and etcetera. Our industries still rely on from neutral markets."

She growled at the thought of an impending economic terrorist attack. "If Kohler Act gets passed, we'll be like Russia or Iran under the thumb of US sanctions." She rolled her eyes. "What a terrible way to destabilize GACSS."

"Maybe, but I doubt everyone in the FYC command structure is in on it." Ulrich stroked his chin. "What about Francine?"

"That's a name I haven't heard in a while." Halfrida stroked her chin for a few seconds, thinking. A rain cloud floated over her head. Like in *Die gar traurige Geschichte mit dem Feuerzeug* ('*The Very Sad Story of the Matches*'), it doused Halfrida in gasoline. Twin lightning bolts set her ablaze. "I think we can make arrangements for assassinations and a little bit of software piracy."

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(*One month later*)

June 12. Two young government lobbyists sat on opposite ends of a long boardroom table inside a concrete room, thousands of feet below the McAdams family ranch. Patrick and Lloyd Cardington-McAdams, Francine's brothers, waited for the Ryanite cowards to deliver them their ransom money. Lloyd, the younger brother, studied the May 10 edition of *The Wall Street Journal.*

"Did you hear?" Lloyd spoke to Patrick. "Bauer Industries and other companies with Ryanite shares are skyrocketing again."

"Insider trading as usual," Patrick said. "There's nothing that SEC can do these days." He leaned forward. "Remember the 2008 Recession?"

"You know I don't forget about these things, Pat," Lloyd quipped. He flipped to another page. "The government owed a lot of money to the Brotzmans.

Not reparations for bombings over the cities of Nazi Germany, but Faustian bargains to keep America safe from Communism."

"That's human nature for you," Patrick whistled.

"Right," Lloyd yawned. "But after the Soviet Union fell, the Brotzmans tried to make the government pay up, not with debt-issued IOUs, but with real money. Question is: did they do it on the morning of September 11, 2001?"

"Huh," Patrick muttered under his throat, "I didn't know that."

"Yeah," Lloyd continued, "While the rest of America watched planes crash into buildings, the Brotzmans called the government through the White House switchboard. I'm trying to figure out if they were also the ones who threatened to launch US thermonuclear weapons at Russia."

"It makes your head wander," Patrick chuckled. "I still find it odd that the whole family, to this day, refuses to share where they were on 9/11."

"Why wouldn't they, given the context of that morning?"

"True, but I have trouble imagining twins Harold and Halfrida Brotzman, at four years, being inside the Twin Towers as two planes struck both Towers." Patrick scratched the back of his head. "Perhaps they weren't at the World Trade Center, but the 'Deutsche Bank Twin Towers' in Frankfurt, Germany."

"Too much speculation."

"Guess we'll never know what that family was doing on that morning." Patrick wrapped his hand around a remote, pointed it at a HD television mounted on a wall, and turned it on. Patrick changed the channel to EWTN, an American Catholic TV Network. It fell into Ryanite hands after the Harrisburg Incident. A special, fast-paced news show came after a mid-nineties rerun of *Mother Angelica Live*. Patrick's eyes were fixed on the screen.

"The Kohler Act remains unopposed," a woman's voice announced. The screen later showed a Democrat congressman speaking before Congress, in favor of the Plaid Prohibition. "The future of our children's health begins at their schools," he declared.

Patrick muted the TV and laughed. The door opened and a maid with a silver tray entered the room. From the tray, she placed a plate of biscuits, gravy and country fried steak, and a glass of iced tea in front of the two young men.

"Enjoy your meals." The maid bowed her head. "And please don't forget to say grace." She left the room with the tray in hand.

"Of course," Lloyd said, setting aside the newspaper in front of the table.

After saying grace, the two FYC *Generalissimos* dined on their meals. Without warning, the two young men's smartphone vibrated in their pockets. Setting down their forks and knives, they whipped them out and answered the call. "Hello?" they said at the same time.

A mysterious caller on the other end hung up. Concealed bombs, imbued with the Invisibility Anomaly, detonated. The bombs engulfed the whole room in a powerful fiery explosion, frying both men into a fine crisp, giving them no time to react. The room's steel door blew open. Smoke poured out of the room

through exposed doorway and a ventilation duct embedded on a wall. Somebody either connected to GACSS or else a part of GACSS had sent the FYC a message.

***

(*One day later*)

June 13. Orlando, like the rest of Florida, was always hot and humid, even after nightfall. The moon hung over a starlit night before the whole sky turned pitch black. Dark clouds formed. Lightning flashed. Thunder rumbled. Two Category 5 hurricanes brewed many miles away from the Florida's eastern coast. Like a *Jäger* ('hunter') creeping into position and steadying his rifle, Hurricanes 'Halfrida' and 'Perpetua'.

In the tourist part of the city, a multistory hotel building overlooked the I-4 to the east. Hundreds of cars traveled along the roads from both directions.

Halfrida's Mercedes-Benz 600 Großer pulled over outside the hotel entrance. Ulrich and Heinricka got out and strolled into the building. The Mercedes drove away. The hobnails on their jackboots crackled on the concrete floor.

Cold air permeated in the hotel lobby, past the automated sliding doors. A female receptionist had laid her head down at the front desk, snoring away. The noise the cousins made was not enough to keep her awake.

A teenage girl passed by them. She bore an uncanny resemblance to Francine Cardington-McAdams. Ulrich glimpsed at her face. It really was her. Both she and the cousins ignored each other. Heavy rain showered outside. Francine ran away from the hotel building, disappearing into night. Back inside, Ulrich and Heinricka went into a corridor on her right and walked into the buffet room.

At a corner next to a blinded window, Hannelore sat alone at a table. With both elbows pressed against the table, she read a few text messages on her smartphone. The texts came from Margaret Diana Richardson, Jennifer and Percival's quadruplet sister. She sent her a response message before putting the phone inside her purse, resting on the chair beside hers.

She tilted her head to the right and spotted the cousins, walking past her. "Eh, I'm right over here," Hannelore spoke to her in a hushed tone.

The cousins joined Hannelore at the table, pulling up a seat in front of her.

"Do you know if it's hot outside?" Hannelore asked.

"Hotter than Canada or the Fatherland," Ulrich replied.

"Listen, I got the package from Francine." Hannelore reached into her handbag and handed the cousins a package. A layer of packaging tape covered sections of the package. "Get out of here. FBI agents are coming here soon."

"Then make yourself scarce if you have to." Ulrich slid his index finger across his throat. "Keep your mouth shut and pretend we never met. *Alles klar*?"

"*Ich verstehe*." Hannelore, nodding her head, shook Ulrich's hand. "*Los*!" She got up from her chair and grabbed her handbag.

Hannelore and the cousins left the buffet room through two adjacent hallways that went in opposite directions. At the end of each hallway was an exit. All three escaped into the night before the FBI arrived.

Chapter Twenty Two: Plaid Prohibition
(Ryanite Chorus; June 15th-August 1st, 2013)

"The possibility of making and winning war is closely dependent on the economic strength and equipment of a nation. […] I referred to the fact that failure in a prolonged war was inevitable from the very beginning unless the continued supply of foreign raw materials could be guaranteed."
-Hjalmar Schacht, The Magic of Money

Peace Through Strength! newsreels on June 30 reported on an impressive array of events pursued by the usual players. As always, each black-and-white slide played Prussian military music. But one of the slides bore a cartoon drawing of the US Capitol building. *Kohler Act Passed!*, it warned.

A copy of the Kohler Act levitated over its shadow against a white backdrop. President Kohler's signature was scrawled at the bottom of the document. It spun clockwise. "Late into the night of 15 June," Fake News said, "The Kohler Act finally reached the floor of the Senate after the House backed it with 221 votes."

She narrated over boring C-SPAN coverage inside the United States Senate Chamber. In the late-night hours of June 15, the Senate gathered at their desks to cast votes on the Kohler Act before it was brought to the White House. "The Wolff administration used a little-known parliamentarian maneuver called 'Reconciliation,'" she continued. "Bypassing the 'Byrd Rule', Reconciliation allowed the Kohler Act to be passed with fewer votes."

Chatter bellowed in the chamber. The camera focused on Vice President Nicholas Fitzgerald, presiding over the gathering from his desk in the front of the chamber. "Senate will come to order, please." Vice President Fitzgerald banged his mallet against the gavel. "Senate will come to order, please," he repeated himself. The clock struck midnight.

Holding a piece of paper with both hands, Vice President Fitzgerald read aloud the results. "On this vote, the yeas are 51, the nays are 49. The Vice President votes in the affirmative-"

The newsreel cut to a scene of President Wolff sitting behind his desk inside the Oval Office. Surrounding him were various religious clerics, secular corporate CEOs, several Jackbooters, and Halfrida, Perpetua, Francine and Hannelore.

Fake News narrated the scene. "With House and Senate having voted in favor of the Kohler Act, the documents reached the desk of President Howard Wolff. Kohler Act dictated 'a nationwide ban on sales of sugary and salty foodstuffs to *most* public, private, and charter schools' under the pretext of fighting childhood obesity. Exceptions were made to 'religious schools, which are protected under the First Amendment' (read: the SSEs of GACSS, Underground, FYC, and Western Commonwealth)."

The footage went in slow motion. President Wolff grabbed a fountain pen resting beside a copy of the Kohler Act. Everyone clapped their hands and smiled they watched the President. He signed on the dotted line, passing the Kohler Act into law. The footage paused, yet the newsreel resumed.

The camera panned at the four girls hovering by the window behind the President's chair. It zoomed in on Perpetua. "For Perpetua, Underground annexed SSEs in the Caribbean, denying GACSS access to vital strategic resources there."

The camera focused on Francine. "For Francine, the deaths of her brothers enabled her to assume the leadership of the FYC. Speculation abounds on whether FYC and their ally, the Communist Dweller People's Northwestern Union will enter the war as allies of Underground."

The camera pointed at Hannelore. "For Hannelore, Bauer Industries solidified its trade with the GACSS. It continued to supply GACSs with construction materials as a neutral ally."

The camera panned on Halfrida. "And as for Halfrida, Ryanite Jackbooters traded with newfound trading partners in the 'Catholic School International.' Curious by this sudden development, I approached Halfrida Brotzman for an interview. She agreed."

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A funeral hearse was parked by the curbside in the front of Plaidstadt. The Brotzman twins' Mercedes-Benz 600 Großer was parked behind it and Anthony Accardo's Lincoln Versailles. The Confederation ensign, a gold cross over a violet background, fluttered in the air beside the Republic ensign on two separate flagpoles. Accardo himself and his Nightingales, clad in their school uniforms and brass dove pins, formed two columns between the footpaths to the curbside.

The Brotzman cousins had gathered inside the State Chancellor's office before attending the funeral of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Each cousin had a maroon-colored Maltese cross: one pinned to their chests; another over their necks, connected to a black and white band. A gold clasp of a rose was fastened on the band, connecting the band to the second cross. The Maltese crosses and clasp were the Service Cross 2nd and 1st Classes and the Rose Clasp in Gold. Awards were given to Ryanites in the Republic and Confederation Programs.

"Hawthorne and Leblanc were childhood friends," Harold said to Halfrida and his cousins, holding an envelope. "They grew up in Orlando their whole lives and attended the same schools together since Kindergarten. When he died in the hospital of Leukemia last week, I swore that can't be a coincidence."

"Stuff happens," Heinricka said. "The Conspiracy isn't always out to get us."

"*Ganz genau*." Ulrich nodded.

"And now, the moment we've all been waiting for." Harold peeled open the envelope containing the late Nathaniel's personal will to the Brotzman family. Included was a folded municipal map of Jackbooter businesses in Orlando.

"I was just about to fall asleep from all this waiting," Halfrida yawned.

"'To my other most trusted acquaintances, the Brotzmans,'" Harold declared, "'I hereby pass on my Jackbooter assets to you. These are the cosmetics, candy, and soda distilleries I have established throughout Orlando.'"

"This is in addition to assets located in the city's shopping malls," he continued. "Should I proceed to name all twenty of them?"

"No need," Halfrida replied.

"Is that all he wrote?" Heinricka asked.

"Not yet." Harold held up his index finger as he read the last paragraph of the will. "'To State Chancellor Harold Brotzman of the Republic Program: my Golden Rose Clasp is now property of the Greater American Catholic School System as a symbol of its legitimacy along with the *Plaidfahne*.'"

Halfrida threw up a clenched fist in the air. "This funeral is turning out to be worthwhile after all!" She pointed at the small, opened jewelry box on her brother's desk. Inside was a golden clasp depicting a rose. "Is that his?" she pointed at it.

Ulrich glanced at it. "Ja," he told her. "Please continue, Cousin Harold."

"That's…all?" Harold blurted, eyes still glued to the paper in his hands. He flipped the page back and forth a few times before tossing it into a paper shredder next to his desk. "It's all he wrote, it seems."

"Since we got that out of the way, we've got some housekeeping to sort through." Halfrida reached for a clipboard resting atop a stack of papers inside her brother's inbox. She went through a to-do list attached to the clipboard.

"Did you hear the news about Operation Duchesne from Head Minister Leblanc?" Harold asked his sister.

"I have." She nodded. "RGA has already secured all of Other-Florida. The Underground won't be harassing the SSEs in the real Florida with Teleportation Transponders anytime soon."

"Don't forget Teleport Anomalies – the Anomaly that enables access to the Otherworld," Ulrich chimed.

"Of course," she said. "Teleportation Transponders are two-way devices."

"Anyway, what's this business I hear between you and Remnants Prime Minister Lester von Baumgärtner?" Harold added.

Halfrida straightened her necktie. "I acquired Project SCHLEDGEHAMMER, a Rosy War-era project to build a 3,200mm railway supergun. Von Baumgärtner claims it can fire shells across a few thousand miles."

Harold's jaw dropped. "Your childhood dream gift?"

"A weapon like that could help RGA forces in the Otherworld," she giggled. "For now on, call it the *Halfrida Brotzman Geschütz*–my big gun."

"You decided to have it built in Other-Orlando?" Ulrich questioned.

"It was the closest place that the Remnants could safely transport the components to, from a secret location in *Neudeutschland*," she explained. "Operation Duchesne's goal was securing Other-Orlando and all of Florida. The Remnants are constructing it as we speak."

Heinricka voiced, "Wait, what happened to St. Margaret's Cellar and the former grounds of Kirov Mansion?"

"Annexed into the Confederation Program by RGA," she replied. "Those blond-haired, purple-eyed Bluebloods are under Ryanite military occupation."

"That wasn't the only thing that happened last month," Harold chimed. "I also fostered diplomatic ties with our Catholic school counterparts from abroad. They've recently organized themselves into an UN-like faction called the 'Catholic

School International'–CSI for short. I also heard they want to have a trade deal with us and the Remnants."

He continued. "At the same time, we even managed to form the famed Adelburgers of old from the Ryanite Prosperity Sphere days. Walther, our godfather, tells me it was President Wolff's idea from back then, not his."

"I figured," Ulrich scratched the back of his. "Cousin, we should get going. We can talk about this stuff later."

"We should," Heinricka urged. "It's going to be a busy day anyway."

Harold nodded his head. He scooted out of his chair and walked out of the room. Before Ulrich and Heinricka could follow his lead, Halfrida whispered to them. "Listen, Drusilla, Hannelore, and Lance have informed me of abandoned motor pools that we should investigate."

"Where?" the cousins responded at the same time.

"Orlando, Florida," she answered. "Want to come with me once we finish that business in Other-Orlando?"

"Not like we got anything better to do after this," Heinricka replied.

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(*One days later*)

Dark clouds bombarded Orlando with a heavy downpour by the end of June. Strong winds blew past midnight. Few cars zipped up and down the streets in front of the 'World's Largest McDonald's'. Halfrida's Mercedes-Benz 600 *Großer* was parked at a space next to the building. Far from just any ordinary McDonald's, this restaurant featured an Italian gourmet menu, an arcade full of arcade game cabinets, and touchscreen kiosks for placing individual orders.

While Category 5 hurricanes scared away tourists, they also attracted a certain band of goose-stepping tourists. Hurricane Perpetua kept most tourists far away from two tables shared by Halfrida, Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka, Hannelore, Lance, Drusilla.

Heinricka nibbled on slices of pizza topped with Tuscan sausage and shrimp. Ulrich speared marinara-covered ravioli on a ceramic plate with a stainless-steel fork. Drusilla cut a slice out of stack of Belgian waffles. Hannelore feasted on a hot pastrami sandwich. Lance consumed a Big Mac in between some French fries and a couple or so sips out of a large cup of Coke.

Halfrida wolfed down the restaurant's equivalent to a military-grade daily field ration for one person. Ten Big Macs, five large cartons of French fries, several slices of New York-style cheesecake, chocolate syrup spooned over a banana split with several ice cream scoops, and a large cocktail of soda.

Drusilla snickered. "Look at her go." She pointed at Halfrida.

"Don't fight the War on Terror on an empty stomach," Hannelore giggled.

"I know, right?" Lance winked.

"Cousin Harold is missing out on this," Ulrich voiced.

"Nein, nein," Halfrida told him. "Fast food isn't his thing."

"Ja, he's a vegetarian painter just like a certain Austrian man," Heinricka said.

Finishing her one-day meal, Halfrida wiped her mouth with a few napkins. She set all of her empty cartons, boxes, and cup aside on an adjacent table. "So what's this manpower crunch GACSS has in its midst?" With a toothpick, she proceeded to remove food debris from her perfect set of sparkling white teeth.

Hannelore reached into her handbag resting on her lap and pulled out a composition file folder. Opening it, she read aloud a highlighted paragraph from a recent RGA intelligence assessment. "'Superior numbers, tens of thousands of strategic bomber A-Wings, access to abundant strategic resource deposits and Anomaly clusters, and an impressive industrial base gave Underground an overwhelming edge against the Ryanites and Remnants.'"

"That's not good," Lance murmured.

"It isn't," Ulrich agreed.

"You were saying, Hannelore?" Halfrida spoke to her.

Hannelore nodded her head. She eyed the report and continued reading. "'Manpower crunches plagued the Ryanite war machine as the RGA continued to capture more land in Eden. In the Real World, places like Orlando were no exception.'"

Heinricka, seated beside Hannelore, glanced at another paragraph. "Every year in America, over four million youths run away from home or get thrown out in the streets?"

"Sounds accurate," Halfrida voiced sarcasm. "I bet millions more died each year from boredom and life on the streets." She chuckled. "Tell me, Hannelore: what does RGA High Command, in all their wisdom, have in mind?"

"We should 'invite' them to live and work at clandestine *Sommerlager* ('summer camps')," Hannelore suggested. "Abandoned shopping malls, neighborhoods, schools, tunnels and bunkers will house these youths. Invisibility Anomalies are to be used to mask their existence."

"I mean, the War on Terror is the continuation of World War II under a new name," Drusilla said. "At some point, we're going to have to mention this part."

"But whatever we do," Ulrich warned, "Serious attempts must be made to giving them good treatment before integrating them into the GACSS. Catholic Identity, Catholic Identity First."

Halfrida nodded her head. "I agree with you, Cousin. There are certain things which we must bear in mind while conducting this war."

"Either way," Lance said in a passionate voice, "We've got an opportunity for the Ryanite war machine to benefit."

"Yes, we do, Lance…," Halfrida said. She and the other five knocked on the table as a form of unanimous applause.

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"Lock it up, people!" somebody yelled in the distance. "We got to move!"

The Catholic School Underground, in their retreat from Orlando as RGA advanced further into the city's Secret School Economies, left much of their MAFV motor pool and A-Wing fleet behind. These MAFVs and A-Wings were unique in that they were utilized in Jackbooter operations, not combat operations.

Some of them were housed on the former grounds of Holy Trinity, a Catholic high school that had been closed off since 2008. The nearby neighborhood was full of foreclosed houses, its previous owners the victims of the Subprime Mortgage Crisis that eventually led to the Great Recession.

Halfrida, Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka, Lance, Drusilla, and Hannelore decided to scour the area before anyone else could investigate. Clad in Fackelträger suits and night vision goggles, they crept along a concrete sidewalk. On the way to Holy Trinity, the street lamps throughout the neighborhood failed to shine light on the sidewalks. No cars on the roads. No pedestrians on late night strolls. No homeless people in the foreclosed houses. The Underground's presence, for a while, kept the locals away.

A dead raccoon lay on a slab of concrete, blood gushing out of the carcass. Halfrida and the others tip-toed over it. Heinricka caught a whiff of it. The nauseous smell left a terrible taste in her mouth. "Cousins, I feel like I'm going to…" She vomited her meal all over the grass next to the raccoon.

"Gross!" Hannelore spoke, pinching her nose, staring at Heinricka.

Halfrida and Ulrich whisked her away with them.

In the distance, they heard gasoline engines, jackboots trampling on asphalt, hollering voices. Halfrida, leading the group, motioned everyone to hide behind some bushes between the front of the campus and the sidewalk. Everyone nodded their heads as they advanced past her. Halfrida joined them.

From the bushes between the campus lawn and a sidewalk, the group observed the parking lot. There was a whole lot of activity going on at the campus. Underground troops dressed in civilian clothes hurried back and forth through a side entrance on the left side of the school, loading crates and cardboard boxes into the backs of several dozen U-Haul and Ryder trucks. The trucks' engines rumbled, their headlights flickering to life, a driver behind the wheel of each. When they finished loading the last of their equipment, the Underground soldiers hurried to the back of the trucks.

The fleet of trucks drove off as a single convoy, turning right on the road in front of the school, and disappearing into the night. Watching the soldiers drive away, Halfrida's eyes narrowed. *I wonder what they were hauling*, she thought.

Ulrich, kneeling on the tall grass beside her, tapped on her shoulder. "Let's hurry before the police or whoever finds us."

"I think the police are the least of our worries," Lance told him. "The cops in this whole state are on the local Jackbooters' payrolls."

"Are you serious?" Drusilla voiced.

"Yeah," Lance answered. "The Dweller Mob sells D-VIII in these parts, in case you don't know." He shook his head. "And don't me started about how much money we're talking."

"Whatever," Heinricka interjected.

The cousins, Lance, Drusilla, and Hannelore stood upright, eyes glued at Halfrida. Halfrida gestured at the side entrance where the Underground troops entered and exited the building. "Let's go," she whispered.

The six traveled around the bushes, trampled through the grassy lawn, and crossed the parking lot to the side entrance. At the side entrance, Halfrida pulled the door handle. The former occupiers left the doors of the side entrance unlocked, yet they turned off the lights in an adjacent hallway on their way out. Looking over her shoulders, Halfrida entered the building with the others.

The shelves in the library lay bare. The hallways and lockers were empty. Some of the classrooms were locked from the outside. A peek through the windows on the doors revealed nothing inside the rooms. One room had a trapdoor to a tunnel leading to the Dweller World, but the Underground had poured concrete over it. In a hallway across from the atrium, Halfrida and the others came across the cafeteria on their left and the doors to the gymnasium on the other end. Lights inside both areas were left on. They checked the cafeteria.

Cafeteria tables were arranged in neat columns. Various headsets and controllers for MAFVs and A-Wings were left on each table. Three ice cream refrigerators and a vending machine lined the wall next to the food-serving counters and the checkout lanes. The vending machine, the refrigerators, and the cashiers were emptied of their contents. Beyond the counters were two doors, both standing not far from each other. The door behind the counters was a fire exit, the other led to the kitchen. The six returned to the hallway.

"They were happy enough to leave us controllers and headsets," Drusilla said.

"But they didn't leave any food for us," Hannelore interrupted her.

"Why should they?" Halfrida crossed her arms.

Ulrich pointed at the tables. "There has to be a reason for them to leave their equipment behind like that."

Heinricka shrugged her shoulders. "Isn't that odd?"

"It is." Ulrich nodded.

Lance gestured at the doors to the gymnasium. "Perhaps our answer is beyond those doors?"

"Well," Halfrida retorted, "There's only one way to find out, Lance." She walked up to the door and peeked inside. Like the rest of the school building, the gymnasium was dead silent. No signs of life. Halfrida closed the door and faced the others with her back against the doors.

"Did you see anyone?" Hannelore asked.

"No," she replied.

The six entered the gymnasium. Inside, they came across row after row of parked MAFVs in the basketball court, nested between two long wooden bleachers lining against cinderblock walls. Underground and Christus Rex flags were hung over windows on the walls. The other doors to the gym, however, were shuttered and blocked off with walls of bricks.

The MAFVs that Halfrida and the rest of the group found were unlike anything they had ever seen. Drusilla, on the other hand, was an exception. The MAFVs had their turrets removed and replaced with the reinforced casemate superstructure to fit tools like cranes, plows, winches, and flatbeds. She plodded

around the parked rows, crouching in front of each MAFV and snapping photos with a digital camera.

The motor pool featured a variety of models dating as far back as the Rosy War. Drusilla had no trouble identifying them. The first row had some IDA-issue MAFVs like the St. Ingrid 133, 142, and 148. The Ingrid 133 was patterned after Renault FT-17, 142 after the Hotchkiss H39, and 148 after the Renault R40. The next row were Underground-issue models like the Marcella V/8, and Vladimir I/C. The rest were MAFVs of Bauer Industries manufacture like the St. Lucy L1, the St. Modesta M3, and St. Herman H5. The L1 was based on the Fiat L6/40, M3 after Fiat M14/41, and the H5 after the Carro Armato P40.

"What is she doing?" Ulrich asked Heinricka.

"How should I know?" Heinricka replied.

Hannelore mused, "They might be worth something."

"You think so?" Lance said.

"I guess," Hannelore responded.

The mischievous grin on Halfrida's face widened. *Good thing our MAFV girl genius is a walking encyclopedia of MAFVs*, she thought. She approached Drusilla and stood behind her. "Have you seen these MAFVs before?"

"I have," Drusilla answered.

Halfrida stroked her chin. "You seem unsure if that's in your line of work."

"There's something odd about them." Drusilla pulled out a magnifying glass from her satchel and examined the MAFVs in front of her and Halfrida further. "See these antennae in the rear of the chassis?" She pointed her index finger at each antenna. The antennae, mounted in the back of the MAFVs, protruded upward at a total length of five centimeters. They diverged into four separate metal poles, forming the shape of an inverted pyramid or funnel.

"What are they for?" Halfrida cocked her head to the side.

"They look like receivers for some kind of transceiver," Drusilla elaborated. "Is Underground using automated MAFVs and A-Wings for their Jackbooters?"

"There have been rumors of their existence in the past, now that you mentioned it," she recalled. "We both know that Underground MAFV and A-Wing production is over the charts, vastly greater than anything we or the Remnants can produce. Whether automated ones exist or not, prior to tonight, was an open question for the past ten years."

"An open question doesn't spend almost a decade without an answer, Halfrida," Drusilla opined.

"Maybe," she spoke. A dark storm cloud floated over her head, circling around her head like a halo, dousing her in gasoline. Lightning bolts ignited the gasoline, setting her on fire. Halfrida smirked. *I've just got an idea.* "You know what I'm thinking, Drusilla?"

Drusilla tilted her head at her. "What's that?"

"We should use these to further the war effort," she suggested. "Reverse-engineer their technology to bolster production."

"…You might be onto something," Drusilla voiced. She stared at a door to the back of the campus. "For now, let's check what's on the other end."

Halfrida nodded. "Good idea."

An A-Wing airfield, complete with hangars and an air traffic control tower was situated in the back of the campus. All of them dated back to the Rosy War. Several large, lumbering transport A-Wing planes with long wingspans lay abandoned on the runway. They were St. Blaise 200As, six-engine transport A-Wings modeled after the Messerschmitt Me 323 *Gigant* ('Giant'). Two A-Wings of Bauer Industries manufacture, St. Felicity Fe176E and Fe180D, found inside the hangars, their airframes based on the Macchi MC.200 and MC.205 respectively.

Ulrich crouched beside them and snapped a couple photos with his digital camera. "Interesting," he murmured. "These must be captured Remnants A-Wings," he muttered under his throat.

Halfrida and Drusilla stood between him. Arms crossed, Halfrida pointed at antennae sticking out of the roof of the fuselage. "Seen any of these A-Wings before?" she asked him.

"They're all from the Rosy War," he said.

"See those antennae?" she pointed at them. "Apparently, they must be receivers for automated MAFVs and A-Wings. Drusilla and I are thinking we should reverse engineer them and use them for our own Jackbooter operations in the future."

"I can't see why not," Ulrich chuckled, snapping a photo of other A-Wings.

Halfrida giggled. *I think we've got a lot going for us*, she thought.

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(*One month later*)

In the hallway outside the State Chancellor's office, two stern-faced, jackbooted Adelburgers with MP40 submachine guns slung over their shoulders guarded the doors. The doors opened. Allison Schmidt, clad in a St. Eustace uniform, walked out with an empty silver tray in her hands. Closing the doors behind her, the Adelburgers saluted Allison as she plodded away from the hall.

Inside the office, two propaganda posters were plastered on a wall. Harold, Halfrida, and Cousins Ulrich and Heinricka gazed at the posters, sipping glasses of orange juice. On the desk was a silver jug of orange juice, a bucket of ice, and a china plate of pastries, cookies, and scones. The windows behind the desk were opened and no longer blocked by the thick curtains. Warm sunlight and a gentle breeze entered the room. The curtains swayed left and right.

One poster featured a Ryanite boy in RGA uniform and coal scuttle helmet, resting a Walther G41 semi-auto rifle against his shoulder, smoking. Next to him was another teenage boy, resting a scythe against his shoulder, smoking. A red-and-white badge with the Gothic blackletters 'GW' was stitched to his shirt. *Life is worth living again now that I'm working to feed, clothe, and arm you!*, the poster read.

Another propaganda poster depicted a fourteen year old nanny in a maid uniform placing plates of food in front of two seven year old children. The children's mother, aged at around twenty one years, lingered in the background

kitchen, smiling at her nanny. It read: *I live with a Ryanite family and I'm feeling swell! Help GACSS with their household chores!*

Harold questioned his twin sister, the architect of this idea. "Are you sure this is ethical, Halfrida?"

"It's not like we had a choice in the matter," she replied. "Besides, history is written by the victor."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harold rolled his eyes. "Forget it, just get don't us in trouble."

"Heinricka and I will make sure trouble doesn't come our doorstep, Cousin," Ulrich promised him.

"I hope so," Harold mumbled.

"You know I hate the family's past as you do," Ulrich retorted.

"Fair enough," Harold spoke.

Chapter Twenty Three: FORESIGHT
(Fair Knight; January 10th, 2014)

"[Wernher] [v]on Braun and his group were aware that the Messerschmitt and BMW archives also contained valuable data on recently abandoned—but under normal conditions, potentially viable—projects that could be brought to fruition by any nation with the requisite funds, experts, and facilities."

-Tom Agoston, Blunder!

Months passed. The Plaid Prohibition came and went; fortunes won and lost, others minted overnight. By October 2013, Independent Dweller Army (IDA) forces, backed by Underground weapons and training, recaptured every Dweller city beneath Florida, including St. Margaret's Cellar. As the RGA retreated from the Dweller World, elite Adelburger troops blew up railroad lines, confiscated refined Anomalies, and torched buildings.

In late December, a new lead in the Ostara Conspiracy coincided with reports of a burglary at Plaidstadt. Days later, after New Year's, a massive winter snowstorm descended upon Philadelphia and its surrounding counties.

An all-night diner stood on the roadside of a busy interstate road. Next to the diner, an old payphone rang. Truckers and travelers came in and gone out of the diner, ignoring the phone. From night's dark shroud, the Mercedes-Benz 600 Großer drove off the interstate, into the diner's parking lot. The vehicle parked at an empty space not far from the payphone.

The driver's door opened. Chandler got out, his trusty S&W handgun concealed underneath a leather overcoat. His breath froze in the cold air. The payphone was still ringing.

Looking over his shoulder, he picked up the handset. An eighteen wheeler hauled its cargo through the roadway from the east. Chandler covered his other ear. On the other end was Halfrida. "Are you outside the diner?" she asked.

"Yeah," Chandler answered. "Why couldn't you contact me the normal way?" He was referring to the Telepathic Chat Relay Halfrida grew fond of.

"Battery ran dry," she said. "Right now, I'm charging it."

"Do you have to go into detail? You never know what government agency is listening to us over the phone."

"FBI, CIA, NSA, ATF, DEA, DHS; one chases after you, the rest join in," Halfrida chuckled. "Sounds like paranoia – no different than cowardice."

Chandler rolled his eyes. "Try me." His body shivered, the longer he stood out in the subarctic cold. "Cut to the chase, why are we here? Between your brother not being in the right frame of mind and the recent break-in at Plaidstadt, you might be onto something."

"That's what got my attention. I think it's to what we're after and someone who has a past connection to my family."

He eyed the parked Mercedes. Ice began to pile up on the roof, hood, trunk, and both windshields. "Where are you?"

"Look under the payphone."

Chandler placed his hand underneath the payphone. Something had been taped there – a slip of paper. "What is it?"

"The address of the person we're supposed to meet. Come alone. Make sure you're not being followed."

"Be there in an hour or two."

She hung up.

Chandler dropped the handset, left it dangling as he removed the tape off the paper. He took it with him and went inside the diner for a cup of coffee and a couple doughnuts.

The address belonged to a gated community outside Philadelphia. Night kept the pedestrians and vehicular traffic in the streets away. The snowstorm decreased that number even further. Outside the manor, the gates opened as Chandler cruised up the snow-plowed road. Surveillance cameras posted around approach to the manor captured the Mercedes driving toward the front driveway.

Halfrida waited at the porch, the doors behind her. She waved at Chandler as he stopped the car in front of the porch steps. He walked up the steps. They embraced each other with open arms and exchanged a kiss.

"Long time, no see," she said, arms wrapped around him. "Have you been taking care of my car these past several months?"

"I have," he whispered. "So the rumors are true?"

"Yeah," she answered. "Somebody broke into Plaidstadt one night and stole the Plaidfahne and the Hawthorne's Golden Clasp. If you ask me, I think the Conspiracy was involved."

"Maybe you're right, maybe not." He agreed to disagree. "Let's assume there's no correlation between the burglars and the Conspiracy."

"That is, until we find more evidence." Halfrida released her arms from him and pushed the doorbell buzzer next to the sturdy wooden doors. The roof over the front porch kept the snow at bay. The storm intensified. Freezing winds blew a new layer of white confetti all around the manor lawns. The outside world disappeared behind a thick, ice-cold fog.

The manor doors opened to reveal a nun in her late-twenties. She smiled at the two teenagers standing in front of her. "Welcome to the Cardinal-Archbishop's residence. The Most Reverend, His Eminence, Cardinal Wolk and the others are expecting you upstairs."

"The others?" Chandler pondered.

"You'll find out in due time," Halfrida whispered.

Chandler tilted his head towards her. "What's going on?"

She patted his shoulder. "Like I said, *you'll find out*."

They followed the nun into the building. Inside, the air in manor was no different than outside. Colder than the devil's heart, colder than the loaded Cz75 inside Halfrida's handbag.

The nun guided them around the manor halls. Gas-powered lamps mounted on well-furnished walls next to hung crucifixes, and icons of various saints and the

Blessed Virgin Mary. All of the rooms were closed behind lock and key. Everything had regressed into a singular course. She led the two up the stairs, past a statue of the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus in her arms.

As they trudged up the stairs, Halfrida spoke to her. "Sister, may I ask for your name?"

"Sister Maria Bianchi, IHM – Immaculate Heart of Mary," she replied.

The nun's name reminded Halfrida of someone close to her brother. She gazed at Chandler, walking alongside her. The nun's last name reminded her of Nadine Bianchi. "Could you be…?" Halfrida said.

The nun nodded. "Yes, I am the older sister of Nadine Bianchi, the Republic's Deputy Representative of Philadelphia."

"Nadine Bianchi…?" Chandler turned to Halfrida, clueless.

"The fiancée of Republic Representative Henry MacDonald of Philadelphia," she clarified. "My brother, Hannelore, Henry and Nadine are all friends."

The intricate, clandestine world of his girlfriend shrank into the scale of a jigsaw puzzle as he connected the dots. Somehow, the jigsaw puzzle in Chandler's head began to piece itself together. The result was an image of him piecing together that same puzzle. Lady Ostara flanked him from behind with a Browning Hi-Power handgun against his head, a huge gap overhead.

"Sister Bianchi," Chandler blurted, "What is your purpose here?"

"I'm His Eminence's maid – a caretaker, if you will," she replied. "The Cardinal just got out of surgery due to a clotted artery in his leg. Pray that His Eminence will have a speedy recovery for GACSS's sake."

"Sister, I'll keep His Eminence in my prayers." He made the sign of the cross.

The nun stopped in front of a door towards the end of a carpeted corridor. With a skeleton key, the door was unlocked. She opened the door for them. "Chandler, Halfrida," she told them, "Come inside. They're anxious to begin." Sister Bianchi motioned them to head inside.

"The more the merrier," Halfrida said as she entered.

Chandler nodded. The answers to all his questions loomed ahead.

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The door led to a conference room with an oak-furnished boardroom table and several oak chairs. A digital projector rested in the middle of the table, a shining light pointed at a blank screen. The window blinds were shut, snow and ice building up on the glass.

A group of elderly men in clerical collars were seated around the table. Gray-haired, wrinkled, frail even, they were ordained in various religious orders within the Roman Catholic Church. Cardinal Wolk sat at the end of the table, opposite of the one where the projector was placed. Three chairs had been placed near His Eminence: one against the wall behind him, two on his left and right.

Chandler and Halfrida sat on the chairs between Cardinal Wolk. Sister Bianchi took the third one.

"Mr. Martinsen, Ms. Brotzman, we were looking forward to meeting you two tonight," His Eminence told them. "I pray that coming here did not pose any problems for either of you?"

They shook their heads.

Cardinal Wolff smiled. "Then we will fill in the gaps, starting with the ones that died with Nathaniel Hawthorne."

"God rest his soul," Halfrida whispered to herself.

Cardinal Wolk pressed a button on the remote to the projector. A slideshow appeared on the screen. It began with an old colored photograph of fifty men gathered for a group photo outside a bar in an arid, dry desert. The saloon-like building behind them came straight out of a Wild West flick. A date was written on the top: "New Mexico, 1952."

Chandler turned to the Cardinal for the answers he sought. "Your Eminence," he said. "It's true that the Brotzman family were involved in Germany's armaments industry. Their loyalties to Hitler stemmed only because he promised them money if they helped him rearm the country."

"Jawohl," the Cardinal replied.

"And that the family was involved in NPEA Rakonitz and this business involving the *Brotzmanstab*."

Again, the Cardinal nodded his head.

"The trail gets cold after World War II? What happened then?"

"After 1945," Cardinal Wolk said, "The Brotzmans handed some of their research to the US government under Project Paperclip." The next slides showed microfilm snippets of wartime patents and photos of prototypes. Each one was stamped with the words *Streng Geheim*–'Top Secret'.

"Yeah, they offered reels of microfilm in exchange for their freedom," Halfrida added. "But they never gave the Americans the real motherlode."

One slide showed a group of Cardinal Wolk and the priests and monks seated around the table. A photo, dated 1956, depicted the men during their youth, clad in suits and lab coats inside a laboratory. "At the time, we were working with the Brotzman family in Project FORESIGHT for the Argentinian government."

"Argentina?" Chandler's eyebrows rose.

Cardinal Wolk nodded. "Back then I was 'Dr.-Ing. Karl Johannes Stefan Wolk', a nuclear engineer from Vienna. Few people remember my past work; even fewer are aware of my associations with the Brotzmans."

"What exactly was Project FORESIGHT?"

"An old research project dating back to the Weimar years, experimented in the early years of the Cold War," His Eminence explained. "The goal was to develop a nuclear propulsion engine with depleted Uranium as its fuel source."

Halfrida crossed her arms. "An engine could do wonders for the world."

"By 1960, after years of fruitless results and wasted money, I talked the Brotzmans into cancelling FORESIGHT," Cardinal Wolk continued. "We were unable to fully convert the depleted Uranium into a harmless byproduct. The pollution alone was not worth it."

"After the project's cancellation, the research team and I pursued our discernments into either the priesthood or religious life. This brings us to the Rosy War, the Rebirth, GACSS, *Brotzmanskrieg*, and our current situation."

A slide depicting an old school portrait of Lady Ostara appeared onscreen. "Her name is Matilde Geralyn von Brandt. She was a key policymaker in the Remnants government before the Rosy War. In the interwar years, she rallied a band of sympathizers and pursued acquisition of Remnants superweapons projects to restore the old government."

"The old government," Chandler pondered, "Which government?"

"The Neo-Nazi government that ruled Neudeutschland," Halfrida told him. "It paraded and heralded itself as the continuation of the Third Reich."

"Is there even a connection?" Chandler cocked his head to the side.

Halfrida nodded. "There is." She gestured her hand at the projector screen. "Allow His Eminence to explain."

"One of those projects was the Magic Eye." Cardinal Wolk pointed at the slide depicting the blueprints of a disc-shaped A-Wing. "This was one of the Remnants' superweapons projects, but lacked a sufficient engine. A remedy came in the form of a burglary at the Brotzman family estate in Argentina, where they came across the old FORESIGHT documents."

Something clicked in Chandler's mind for the last time. The big gap faded from the jigsaw puzzle in his head. In its place was a Magic Eye floating above.

Halfrida crossed her legs. "But Your Eminence, where does this lead us?"

"A plan to hijack both the GACSS and the Underground through moles implanted within both?" Chandler guessed.

"Mr. Martinsen, you are correct," Cardinal Wolk responded. "Halfrida and I both have evidence suggesting that Lady Ostara and Horst Brotzman are planning a major attack on GACSS and Underground."

Chandler's eyes squinted. "Do we even have a date?"

"21 March, 2014," His Eminence answered. The slide ended.

Sister Bianchi turned on the lights before returning to her seat. All eyes were now on Chandler and Halfrida.

"Assassinate my brother and Emperor Raynerson," Halfrida spoke, stroking her chin. "Have the moles start a military coup to overthrow both, so Lady Ostara can end hostilities." She straightened his posture. "It'll be done in one fell-swoop."

Cardinal Wolk paused. "Hence is why I called you and Chandler here, Halfrida," His Eminence told her. "Your cousins, friends, and I are all counting on you to get Emperor Raynerson's cooperation."

"What's it to the House of Raynerson, Your Eminence?" Chandler questioned. "You do realize we're still at war with them?"

His Eminence nodded. "I understand, but this is a matter of America's national security. Halfrida and her cousins suspect that the Conspiracy may hijack America's thermonuclear arsenal through the FCIMS software. In addition, we also know where the Plaidfahne and Hawthorne's Golden Rose Clasp are."

Chandler's jaw dropped. "You do? Where?"

"An Underground military base called 'Fort Redemption," Halfrida told him. "That's where we come in, Chandler." She stroked her chin. "Emperor Bernard Raynerson is a man of reason. I'm sure we can find a way to convince him."

"Can we?" Chandler asked. "We're on the opposite side of this war, Halfrida. There's no way the Underground will listen to us."

"Anything is possible with God, Mr. Martinsen," His Eminence reminded him. "All you have to do is pray."

Obedient, Chandler bowed his head. "Of course, Your Eminence."

"All we need is to find a way to get into Emperor Raynerson's Imperial Palace," Halfrida mused.

"What happens if he refuses to listen?"

"Chandler, we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

"As for your brother and the GACSS?"

She rolled her eyes. "Leave that one to me! Whatever happens, we can't afford to let either of them die. Brotzmanskrieg may never end if those peacemakers are dead!" Halfrida turned to Cardinal Wolk.

From his pocket, the Cardinal placed a key on the table. "Here, the key to my personal study; the only room in this manor the skeleton key cannot unlock."

Chandler snatched the key off the table. "Thank you, Your Eminence."

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Across the hall from the conference boardroom, Halfrida inserted the key into the keyhole and turned it counterclockwise. The pins inside the lock clicked. Chandler stood beside the prodigal daughter, his head facing hers. "Are you sure we're going to make it out of the Imperial Palace alive?" he asked.

"Of course, we will." Halfrida opened the door. "It's a matter of getting the right choices, the right persuaders, the right time." She strolled inside. "You can bend your slice of Fate to your liking, if you can play your cards right."

"Is that even possible?" Chandler closed the door behind him.

"We all have free will and a conscience, don't we?"

The study room was a dusty, musty space full of book shelves filled to the brim with various religious texts. A crucifix hung on the wall on the other side of the room, behind a desk for the Cardinal-Archbishop. Street lights from the street outside the manor peered through the snow-covered windows.

On the desk was a map of the Imperial Palace. Chandler and Halfrida walked up to it. They held it up with one hand on each side. Cardinal Wolk had taken care of their visit to the Imperial Palace with the keen eyes of an architectural engineer. Keys areas within the Palace were circled in red.

"I wonder where His Eminence found this." Chandler scratched his head.

"Not important," Halfrida replied, studying the layout.

Miles below a private airfield, the Imperial Palace was built like a groundscraper–a 'skyscraper' where the steel and concrete floors extended belowground. Security systems were controlled from a central area in the middle of the Imperial Palace. Several floors down, a hardened bunker housed the Underground's Central Command, the brains behind its armed forces.

The bunker also contained the inner sanctum of Emperor Raynerson and other prominent Underground officers. The royal throne room was situated on same floor as the Emperor's personal office, right above his penthouse suite.

"How are we supposed to navigate our way around the Imperial Palace?" Chandler asked. He found his answer in the form of the ventilation systems connected to every floor within the installation. "Never mind, forget what I said."

"You're right." Halfrida agreed on a different tangent. "The facility is bound to have a whole army corps of soldiers and MAFVs down there. Eighty thousand is my guess."

Chandler's eyebrows rose. "Emperor Raynerson has that many under his direct command?! That's at least twice or thrice the number of Adelburgers tasked with protecting all of Wonderland!"

She nodded. "The soldiers at his side are members of the Underground's elite *Christus Rex* Armored Corps. Majority of them are longtime veterans of the Rosy War. Their experience, weaponry and numbers rule out a frontal assault–we'll never make it."

He pressed his hands against his waist. "What do you recommend?"

"We go in with forged papers, forged identities. I'm sure Emperor Raynerson has a rotation of servants who live in Other-Boston and visit the Imperial Palace as part of their duties."

"You think so?" Chandler's eyes narrowed.

"Trust me." She folded the map. "If we can uncover the identities of the servants, we could impersonate them and infiltrate the place unnoticed."

Chandler stroked his chin. "We'll also need some weapons to defend ourselves, should the need arise."

"Not just any weapons, Chandler." Halfrida held up her index finger. "It has to be weapons that are concealable, quiet, and undetectable to the airport-like security in the airfield. That also means finding ways to smuggle them."

"What about Representative Accardo and his Nightingales? Should we get them involved as well?"

Halfrida nodded. "Yes, we need to check the hangars in the airfield, in case the Conspiracy happens to keep a Magic Eye inside one of them."

"How sure are you?"

"It's worth a try, Chandler." She dropped the map into her handbag. "Come on, let's get going." She walked back to the door.

Chandler followed her. "Where are we going?"

"The Otherworld – Other-New-York's version of Manhattan, to be precise," Halfrida answered, her hand wrapped around the doorknob. "We'll pose as Underground civilians and board a train. It'll take us straight to Other-Boston. From there…well, everything we'll is going to be played by ear, Chandler."

"You think that's a good idea?"

"For now," she said. The prodigal daughter opened the door and exited the room. Chandler followed suit, closing the door behind him. The door was locked from the outside.

Chapter Twenty Four: Inner Sanctum (Ryanite Chorus; March 10th-11th, 2014)

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust."

-Matthew 5:43-45, NABRE

Air raid sirens wailed without warning. Like clockwork, AA crews dashed across the grounds to their AA guns and FlaK cannons. St. Faustina Fa38B fighters emerged from the hangars and began taxiing toward the runway. Each A-Wing took turns taking off.

Spotlights lit up the Berlin blue sky. FlaK tracers surged upward. Fa38As prepared to intercept the Ryanite planes above. Over the airfield, Ryanite transport planes flew in a box formation, even as FlaK shells exploded all around. A squadron of five Fa38Bs turned hard left. Intercepting them from behind, they riddled several of the transport planes with their laser beam guns.

One transport plane exploded in midair, its fuselage set ablaze as it nose-dived to a forest outside the base. Another trailed smoke and flames from both of its propeller engines. The Fa38Bs cruised into the defenseless planes, flew north and came back for another run.

When the transport planes were over the airbase, Representative Accardo and his Nightingales jumped out. Parachutes bloomed against the moonlit backdrop. Another wave of strong winds crashed against them as they descended to the ground. A whole platoon was thrown off course.

From the ground, Underground soldiers fired at the Nightingales with Kalashnikovs. The spotlights shined their lights against the airborne intruders. Holes tore through the snow-white parachutes. Some were killed by the ground troops or else the Fa38Bs flying over the airbase. Most landed in the airbase, but were slaughtered.

The doors of a hangar on west side of the airbase opened. An Underground staff car sped out of the hangar, cruising along the tarmac. Emperor Bernard Raynerson and his wife, Empress Benita were seated in the backseats.

Duchess Perpetua rode shotgun next to Felicity. Baroness Felicity had one hand on the steering wheel. She adjusted her glasses with the other hand. The steering wheel swerved left and right on the way to the ongoing commotion ahead. Engines revving, the staff car was speeding up the tarmac at over 100mph.

"Dammit, keep both hands on the wheel, Felicity!" Perpetua barked, wrapping Felicity's other hand around the steering wheel. "This isn't an MAFV!"

"My bad!" Felicity slammed the brake. The car lost its momentum after passing by the air traffic control tower. It stopped behind a field of dead Nightingales still strapped to their parachutes.

Perpetua and Emperor Bernard opened their doors. "Stay here with Her Greatness, Baroness!" Perpetua told Baroness Felicity. Felicity nodded her head, adjusting the rearview mirror.

Up ahead, ten Underground soldiers held the survivors at gunpoint. Representative Accardo, Drusilla, Percival, Jennifer, Joseph, Lance, and Hannelore were kneeled before them, hands over their heads. A closed hangar stood to the left of the soldiers and captives, the tarmac on their right. More Underground soldiers came to apprehend the Nightingales. Jeeps, Humvees and a few St. Longinus Light MAFVs appeared.

Emperor Bernard grinned. "What a shame. An elite posse of Ryanite soldiers with connections to the State Chancellor." He eyed Accardo. "Isn't that right, Anthony?" He reached for his gun, a Beretta M92F. "Or am I wrong?"

The gun barrel was pressed against Accardo's head. "You tell me." Accardo smirked, delighted while being in the companies of another childhood friend.

Memories of the Rosy War sparked inside Emperor Bernard's skull. "Still making the same old come backs? I remembered you when you just a small boy in my brother's army."

"People change, Your Greatness," he told him. "I'm like St. Augustine–from a lowly sinner to one of the most important men in Church history."

"I beg to differ." Emperor Raynerson chuckled.

"Go to hell," Representative Accardo snarled. "This war is so uncalled for and you know it! Tell me, how will *Brotzmanskrieg* spread the Catholic faith to Dwellers and Remnants if we're so obsessed with this Anomaly bullshit?"

His Greatness laughed. "Do I hear propagated gloating?"

"Answer the question, dammit!" Accardo gritted his teeth.

"If you say so," Bernard replied. "We, the homeschoolers of the Catholic School Underground, are the forebears of a new nation under God and Church. The hedonism infecting the West doesn't belong here and the Dweller World. Through Brotzmanskrieg, this nation will usher the beginnings of a new era for Christ's Church!" He tightened his finger around the Beretta's trigger.

"Well, he has a point," Percival commented.

"For real?" Joseph mused, his head facing his.

Jennifer added, "How so?"

"Millions of Catholics have left the faith since the sixties," he explained. "The Catholic schools fell into a state of rising tuition, closing schools, dwindling student populations, and fewer nuns. That's what brought people like Emperor Raynerson and State Chancellor Brotzman to wage this conflict."

"Seriously," Joseph said, "Why do people have to be so stupid?"

"You're correct," Emperor Raynerson told Percival. "Our roles in God's plan have decreased into a singular course. Free Will did the rest."

"Screw you!" Accardo spat a piece of chewing tobacco at his cheek.

Perpetua bashed Accardo's head with a swift pistol whip from her Tokarev handgun. Accardo fell on his belly. Reaching for a napkin inside her fur coat, she wiped the saliva and chewing tobacco from Emperor Bernard's cheek.

"Thank you, Your Highness." He smiled at her.

"A pleasure." Perpetua smiled back.

Christus Rex soldiers poked the barrels of their rifles against the backs of the Nightingales, Lance, and Hannelore. Perpetua slapped a pair of handcuffs against their wrists. "All of you, on your feet," Perpetua bellowed, the other Christus Rex escorting them to the Imperial Palace's dungeon.

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(*Three hours later*)

Inside the House of Raynerson's Inner Sanctum, personal servants resided in small hotel-like rooms at a hallway in the west wing. A long rug covered the middle of the hall from end to end. Pale ceramic vases atop marble pillars nested between a couple doors on both sides. Others had artisan, hand-crafted wooden drawers with lamps or watered glass vases with rose bouquets.

At a room towards the southern end of the hall, Halfrida gazed at the reflection of herself in a mirror. Blocks of Semtex strapped to her tiny breasts and lean abdomen with duct tape, a wireless handheld detonator concealed under the skirt of a black form-fitting A-line dress. A white ruffled half-apron over the A-line dress with white trim. A white maid cap adorned her braided hair like a princess tiara, coupled with long black stockings and matching stiletto heels. She twisted her upper torso around to look at her back.

She heard her boyfriend whistling inside her head. "Halfrida, looking good."

"Don't get any ideas…at least, not right now." She twirled to the active Telepathic Chat Relay resting on a drawer beside a flat screen TV. "I promise, we can roleplay in the bedroom after the wedding."

"Sure," Chandler gave out a light cackle. He banged his head on something.

"Are you crawling through an air vent?" she mused.

"Yeah," he quipped.

Halfrida strolled further into the room. The Cz75 Tactical Sports handgun and a full magazine were laid out on the nightstand. A lamp, standing beside an alarm clock by the bedside, was left on. "Where are you now?" She grabbed them and concealed them inside her handbag on the bed.

"Tenth floor," he said, "The Dungeon is on the fifteenth."

"Couldn't you just take the elevator?" Halfrida hung the straps of the handbag over her shoulder and switched off the lamp on the nightstand. She crossed her arms while thinking about Chandler and his delicate features.

The TCR enabled her mind to view Chandler's surroundings through his eyes. He was crawling through air vent, stopping behind metal grating on the ceiling of a room. Beyond the slits, inside a security room, the door was kicked open. "Shoot to kill," someone shouted over a garbled radio in a German accent.

A group of soldiers in black BDU fatigues, Balaclava masks and jackboots stormed through the door. Armed with silenced M4 Carbines, they slaughtered everyone inside like cattle. The sentries seated behind panels of CCTV screens and office desks across the doorway never had a chance.

With military-like precision, the mysterious intruders barricaded the door with whatever furniture was close at hand. Some went on to sabotage communications equipment, severing the Imperial Palace's control over the rest of the Underground.

What the hell…? Halfrida shuddered.

"Both of us know that the Conspiracy has plans to make a move on Emperor Raynerson," he said. "I fear those are Ostara's men. You still want me to rescue the others before meeting you downstairs?"

"I'd hate to see these guys finding them inside the dungeon cells."

Chandler continued crawling through the air vent. "Be seeing you soon."

Halfrida's vision reverted back to the sight of the drawer, flat screen TV, and the TCR device. She exited the room. But with her face well-known among the entire Underground, proceeding further in her normal appearance was suicide.

Out in the hall, she reached into her handbag to retrieve the Pauper Anomaly. Wrapping the Pauper around her hand, eyes closed, Halfrida visualized the likeness of another teenage girl. In an instant, her whole body shape-shifted. Pale complexion, hazel eyes, ash blonde hair, and a mole below the left eye.

The transformation completed, a wide grin spread across Halfrida's face. *'Sharon' needs to put this handbag away in the locker room before attending the dinner party*. She giggled and strutted up the hall, turning right on a corridor that went to another part of the Inner Sanctum.

In the central wing, a large atrium sparkled in shades of white and gold. A giant chandelier suspended from the ceiling. Halfrida treaded across a red carpet over the black and white tiled floor to a grand marble stairway with golden railings.

Two Underground soldiers stood erect between opposite ends of the carpet, at the foot of the stairway. The golden Sacred Heart of Jesus patches on the sleeves of their formal khaki tunics belonged to the Emperor Raynerson's *Christus Rex* Armored Corps. The Christus Rex in ceremonial garb held their SVT-40 semi-auto rifles close to their right thighs, the rifles' butts on the ground.

As Halfrida got closer, the soldiers placed the butts on top of their right hands, the rifle placed against the right shoulder. She walked up the stairs, her dress riding a few inches upward. She flustered, cheeks reddening. *I hope they saw my panties and not the bomb–this dress is a little too short for me.*

Upstairs, carpeted walkways with gold railings and closed doors guarded by more elite Underground soldiers overlooked the atrium. Oil paintings of the Virgin Mary, various saints like Ss. Perpetua and Felicity, and Jesus Christ adorned the walls. She walked straight past the door ahead of her, into a locker room adjacent to a nearby kitchen.

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Meanwhile, twenty floors above the Inner Sanctum, the metallic grating of an air vent on a concrete ceiling popped open. The grate smacked a black and white tile floor. The lights were off and nobody was inside the room. A rope fell to the floor below. Chandler crawled out of the vent and climbed down on the rope.

Landing feet first and crouching, he drew two S&W Model 39 handguns holstered on his hips. Both guns had silencers attached to their gun barrels. He slipped on a pair of night vision goggles.

The room illuminated in shades of pale green. He stood up and explored the room. Carpeted floors, a coffee table between several tables, a bar counter with shelves full of alcoholic beverages. A flat-screen television set was mounted on the wall next to the bar. "This looks like a private lounge for the dungeon guards," he whispered to himself. "I should be getting close."

A set of closed double doors stood on the far left corner of the room. Chandler twisted the doorknob. The door was locked. He reached into a pouch on his person to retrieve a lock picking set.

The door led to a long corridor of concrete. Fluorescent lights embedded in the ceilings brightened up a few sections, the rest of the area left in complete darkness. Signs posted on wall in front of him had white arrows with room names facing both ends of the corridor.

"Dungeon Security Command and Control," the sign with the right arrow read. Printed below were the words "Dungeon Entrance" and "Interrogation Rooms A-B." Chandler tilted his head to the other sign. It read, "Cell Blocks A-B," with "Infirmary" below it.

Chandler stroked his chin, looking back and forth at the two signs. "Which one shall I take?" Both routes were bound to bring him a step closer to rescuing the others, each laden with different outcomes. He stood idle in the black shadow concealing his presence.

He shifted his body to the left. "I should check the Cell Blocks first," he muttered. Jogging down the left hand path, both guns drawn, Chandler came across a corridor on his right. The one ahead of him veered left into another corridor that left to the Infirmary and Cell Blocks C-D. He turned right.

A CCTV camera mounted on the corner of the ceiling, its lens pointing at the doorway outside Cell Blocks A-B. A steel frame door was locked behind a keypad panel embedded on the door. With the gun on his right hand, he pointed it at the gun and squeezed the trigger. The bullet shattered the camera lens. Sparks flew out of the exposed hole.

The camera now disabled, Chandler approached the doorway. On the keypad panel, he pushed the '1' key four times. The door cackled and mocked him for entering the wrong code. Chandler sighed. "Guess I was wrong after all." He turned around and returned the way he came.

Then without warning, the handle on the door began to turn itself. He tilted his head at the doorway. Someone on the other side was trying to open. Concealed in a patch of darkness, he pointed both handguns at the doorway.

The door opened. An Underground sentry wearing an olive drab beret appeared at the doorway. Tall and muscular, he towered over Chandler at seven feet. He yawned and stretched his arms at the doorway. "Geez," the sentry complained, referring to Drusilla, "The little runt can't even keep her mouth shut!"

Chandler charged towards the sentry. He pulled the triggers of his guns twice. Four shots zoomed towards the sentry's pale head. All four penetrated his head before lodging themselves inside the frontal lobe of his brain.

The sentry dropped dead. Chandler breezed past his corpse. Past the doorway, Chandler arrived at Cell Block A. The cells on his left and right were devoid of prisoners. Each one had a simple bed, toilet, sink, and table. The path ahead converged on a horizontal pathway that went in two directions. The rest of the A Cells were on the left path. He took the other path.

A new corridor on the far left corner led to Cell Block B. More cells were discovered, a few containing live captives. A drunken Underground officer leaned on the cell door on Chandler's right. "Hay,…ova hear!"

The officer stumbled to the cell door and stuck his arm out of the cell's bars, waving his hand at him. Chandler stopped by the man's cell, arms crossed and guns holstered. "B-3" was stenciled above the cell in white. "Ya gone any m-moree..uh…whiskeyyy, bar-man?" He vomited on the floor of his cell.

Some of the bile managed to hit the floor outside the cell. Chandler stepped back. Talking to him was not worth his time. He walked away. "Wear ya goin'?" his voice slurred. "Comb black ear!" He slipped on his bile and fell on his back.

Cell B-8 housed a crazed junkie addicted to D-VIII. He sat Indian-style at the corner of his cell, rambling to himself. "I died. I died, I just don't know it yet."

A few cells down, at Cell B-10, a maid leaned on the wall of opposite of her bed. She whistled at Chandler, beckoning him to come closer. "You're not one of the guards," she said. "Who are you?"

"No comment," Chandler replied.

"I see we're off to a bad start," she said. "That tone won't get you anywhere."

"Sorry." He scratched the back of his head. "I'm not from here. The last two prisoners I came across weren't the most talkative."

"What brings you here?"

"I'm looking for someone." He showed her a photograph of Drusilla. "Little girl with auburn hair, green eyes, milky white skin, dressed in black." He gave it to her. "Can't be older than twelve or thirteen."

The maid glanced at the photo and returned it to him. "I saw her with the guards earlier. She strutted to the cell door and poked her arm out. Her hand was pointing across the hall to Chandler's right. "You can find her at B-24."

"Thanks." Chandler walked away. True to the maid's word, he encountered Drusilla at Cell B-24, dozing on a bed. "Drusilla," he called out to her, "Wake up."

"What did I miss?" Drusilla got out of bed. "Chandler?" She ran up to the cell door. "How'd you get here? Where are the others?"

"I found my own way in, unlike you guys," he told her.

She smacked her forehead with her hand. "Oh, come on! Why didn't Halfrida tell us about her cover?"

Chandler shrugged his shoulders. Several footsteps echoed from somewhere nearby. He drew his guns, his body facing the source of the noise. "But that's the

least of our worries. The Conspiracy's here and they just severed communications in the Imperial Palace."

"What does that mean for us and Emperor Raynerson?"

"It just means that we're the only ones standing between Ostara and anyone guarding Emperor Bernard."

From the hallway ahead of him, Joseph, Percival and Jennifer appeared. Bloodied, bruised and beaten, an unconscious Joseph dragged his feet on the floor, arms wrapped around the necks of the Richardson siblings. Both siblings carried an M4 Carbine by the fore grip. "Joe's going to be alright, he's going to be alright," Jennifer mumbled.

"Of course he will, so stop worrying so much," Percival reassured her.

Lance came after the three. A bloodstained bandage was wrapped around his forehead. He approached Chandler with his Walther P38 handgun, chambered for .38 Super, drawn. "Are you still with us, Hannelore?"

"I am." Hannelore stayed close to him, limping, her left hand pressed against a gunshot wound on her right thigh. She left behind a trail of oozing blood as she went. The heiress collapsed on Chandler's feet.

"Thank God, you all are still alive." Chandler made the sign of the cross.

"Save it for later, Chandler," Percival hollered. "We still have an Underground Emperor's ass to kiss."

A throbbing headache forced Lance to place his hand over his forehead. "I swear: this mission is so uncalled for!" He shouted at Chandler. "Why the hell are we working to save our enemy? Let Ostara kill him, I don't give a damn!"

"But this is our best chance to attaining peace," Chandler told Lance.

"Oh, hell no," Hannelore bickered, "We almost died a few hours ago!"

"Yeah, and Accardo should've listened to us, instead of you and Halfrida," Jennifer said. "Plus, I'd hate to go toe-to-toe with the Christus Rex! There's no way we're going to make it!"

Everybody complained and bickered amongst each other. Chandler had enough. At the top of his lungs, he yelled, "All of you shut up and listen." They directed their attention to him. "How'd you all escape?"

"A power failure in Cell Block C-D caused our cell doors to open," Lance explained. "We got out, retrieved our handguns from an armory and escaped. We passed the infirmary on the way here, came in from an alternate entrance."

"How does that explain Hannelore's wound and Joseph's unconsciousness?"

"Joe was beaten badly by this big dude," Jennifer answered.

Chandler remembered the burly soldier he shot earlier. "Oh, that guy," he opined. "Well, he didn't put up too much of a fight. Four bullets to the head at point blank were more than enough."

"No way," Lance said in disbelief, "Are you serious?"

He nodded. "Yes, I'm serious."

"Damn!" Drusilla's jaw dropped. "Your aim never ceases to amaze me."

"Where's Accardo?" Chandler asked the others.

"He wasn't brought here," Drusilla replied.

"And none of us remember him being taken to a cell in Blocks C or D," Hannelore said.

Percival paused. "He could be in the infirmary."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Chandler urged. "Let's get going?"

Drusilla wrapped her hands around the bars of the cell door. "Are you just going to leave me here to rot, Chandler?"

"Stay where you are, Drusilla," he told her. "I'll find a way to bust you out once we rescue Accardo."

"Should we leave Hannelore and Joe behind?" Lance asked.

Chandler paid brief glances at everyone. "Jennifer, I want you two to stay with Joseph, Hannelore and Drusilla." He turned to Lance and Percival. "You two are coming with me."

"Beats staying here," Percival responded.

"Right behind you," Lance said to Percival. He gave him a high-five.

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In a hallway past the infirmary doors, Chandler encountered a patrol of several sentries from a corridor across the hall. "Enemy spotted," one of the sentries shouted, firing their guns at Chandler.

"We got company!" Percival called out.

A firefight ensured between them and the three Ryanites. Chandler and the boys took cover behind a reception desk. As bullets flew over his head, Percival popped out of cover and emptied his M4 on full auto.

"Cover me, I'm flanking them," Chandler told the boys.

They nodded. Chandler crawled out of the reception desk and ran into an automated sliding door across the reception area. The boys emerged from the desk, covering him.

Lance fired away with his Walther P38. Two of the sentries were maimed by his shots. "Finish them, Percival!"

In the hallway across the reception area, Chandler turned left on a corridor raced to the corner of a wall on the other side. The path to his left revealed the surviving sentries. He rolled around the corner and sent them a barrage of bullets.

Pinned down, the Underground sentries ran back to the corridor they came and took cover behind the corner of a wall. At their new position, they continued the firefight with the Ryanites. Chandler trailed after them through the hallway ahead of him. In another hall, he found the sentries at a corridor on his left.

As the shootout showed no signs of an impending victory, the patrol leader picked his radio. "We need backup," he shouted over the gunfire, "We have intruders inside the Imperial Palace!"

No response came from the other end. "Dammit," the patrol leader cursed, "Did the intruders sever our communications?" He put his radio away.

Across the hall, Chandler reached into his pocket and threw an *Eihandgranate* at them. The egg-shaped grenade exploded on impact, creating a vibration that rocked the adjacent hallway. Chandler raced to the fallen enemy's position.

Percival and Lance rejoined him from the reception area.

Chandler spotted a closed door behind the two boys. A desk window was embedded on the wall beside the door. The brass placard on the door read, "Infirmary Archives." He ran to the doorway and kicked down the door. The hinges broken, Chandler rushed inside.

"Looking for something, Chandler?" Lance asked.

"Thought the room might give us a clue on Accardo's whereabouts," he answered. "Watch my back, you guys." From a filing cabinet, he pulled several medical folders and placed them on a neat and tidy desk. He rummaged through the documents inside the folders.

The boys guarded the doorway. While standing beside Lance, Percival shouted, "Found anything?"

"Not yet…hold on a minute," Chandler responded. After looking through several folders, he discovered Accardo's whereabouts. "He's in Room 202." He grabbed a keycard among a wall of cubby holes containing keycards and exited the room. At the doorway, he reloaded his guns.

"Follow me!" Chandler shouted. He and the other boys shot their way through waves of Christus Rex soldiers on the way to Room 202.

Outside Room 202, the boys approached a keycard-locked door. Chandler swiped the keycard down an electronic slot next to the door handle. The locks inside the door handle clicked and snapped into place, unlocking itself. Opening the door, Chandler entered the room. Percival and Lance stayed outside.

The bathroom door was closed. Chandler heard a toilet flushing from inside, followed by the sound of watering flowing from a faucet. The door opened, revealing Representative Accardo, still in his Fackelträger suit.

Accardo grinned upon seeing Chandler. "Glad you could make it, Chandler."

"Likewise," he retorted. "Listen, we don't have much time left. The Conspiracy is heading down to the inner sanctum as we speak."

"Then I want you to take point for all of us."

Chandler saluted him. "Yes sir!"

Chapter Twenty Five: Weltanschauungskrieg (Ryanite Chorus; March 11th-21st, 2014)

"Our minds are so undisciplined that our doubts rule our lives and we don't master our imagination - it masters us."

-Mother Mary Angelica, PCPA

The House of Raynerson's Inner Sanctum held a celebratory feast in the dining hall, oblivious to escaping Nightingales, roaming neo-Nazi terrorists, and Halfrida posing as one of their maids. Important members of the House of Raynerson were seated around the long table inside the dining hall. The table was packed, from end to end, with china plates of assorted food and drinks, polished silverware, empty wine glasses and china plates.

Pomegranate juice was poured into a glass of ice cubes resting atop the long table. Duchess Perpetua's hand was wrapped around it. "Thank you." Perpetua picked up the glass and drank the cold beverage.

"You're welcome," Halfrida mumbled, still disguised as one of the maids, hands clutched around a glass pomegranate bottle. *Enjoy it while it lasts, Your Highness!* She sneered at Perpetua from the privacy of her thoughts.

Emperor Bernard Raynerson was seated in front of Halfrida and Duchess Perpetua, his beloved Empress Benita sitting on his left. On his right sat his brothers Prince Kyle, and Imperial Lords Hugh and Matthew Raynerson. Lord Hugh, supreme commander of all Christus Rex forces, was Duchess Perpetua's father. Lord Matthew, the eldest of the four brothers, was the stepfather of Baroness Felicity, Countess Cecilia, and Princess Philomena Raynerson.

Most of Perpetua's plates remained full. Perpetua leaned her head against her left hand, bored. Halfrida, standing erect beside Her Highness, kept her own hands behind her back. Lord Hugh glanced at his daughter. "You seem troubled," he told Perpetua, "What's with the look on your face?"

Halfrida tilted her head between Duchess Perpetua and Lord Hugh as they exchanged some table talk. *Gosh, I would love to take some notes right about now.*

"The Brotzman twins, their cousins, and Ryanites are up to something again," Perpetua complained, "As if Lady Ostara wasn't bad enough! Uncle Prince Kyle received reports that RGA building some kind of huge weapon in Other-Orlando. Whatever it is, the extreme secrecy should be enough to warrant our suspicions in the long term."

Glad you noticed my big gun, Your Highness, Halfrida thought.

"Did you find anything tangible?" Emperor Bernard asked Prince Kyle, cutting a slice of a sizzling fillet mignon on his plate. His Greatness stabbed it with his fork and crammed into his mouth, chewing and swallowing.

"They are planning to continue progress on the Remnants' Project SLEDGEHAMMER from the Rosy War," Prince Kyle spoke.

"Dammit!" Lord Hugh banged his fist against the table. "I thought we had dismantled that damnable monstrosity once the ink dried on the Peace Treaty!"

"No, we didn't." Perpetua shook her head and drank some more pomegranate juice from her glass. Halfrida poured more juice into her emptied glass. Perpetua sipped a few times before continuing. "It is imperative that we launch a joint airborne-amphibious operation to retake all of Other-Florida! Only then will we be able to put an end to Project SLEDGEHAMMER."

All eyes, including Halfrida's, were fixed on Emperor Raynerson. His Greatness paused for a few minutes, setting his silverware down between the fillet mignon. Halfrida sighed as she waited. When his resolve was certain again, His Greatness replied, nodding his head: "We should."

Across the room from the long table, the doors to the dining hall swung open. Bullets whizzed over Halfrida and everyone else's heads. Empress Benita screamed in terror. Halfrida ducked behind Perpetua's chair, arms shielding the bomb strapped to her torso and breasts.

Chandler, with his S&W Model 39s fully loaded, flew into the dining hall in midair. A squad of Conspiracy assassins ran up to the doorway, their guns drawn. Chandler's back slid across the table as he emptied his guns at the neo-Nazi terrorists. Plates, platters, silverware, and glasses were swept aside and knocked over. Each terrorist was given a well-placed shot to the head.

Halfrida watched on as time slowed down to a meaningless concept. *Oh hey, it's that time of the month again!*

Duchess Perpetua whipped out her Tokarev handgun and pressed it against Chandler's head. Chandler, having reloaded his guns before she could brandish hers, raised them at her forehead.

Time was still progressing in slow motion. *Why the hell am I standing around and doing nothing?* Halfrida drew her Cz75 Tactical Sports and the bomb's detonator from underneath her A-line dress. Everyone had a chance to see the bomb strapped to her lingerie and stacks and stacks of US one-hundred dollar bills.

Emperor Bernard and the other House of Raynerson nobility brandished their guns. Empress Benita shrieked and ran out of the room, past a rushing platoon of Christus Rex in ceremonial regalia. The Christus Rex at the doorway pointed their guns at Halfrida.

"Freeze!" one of the soldiers yelled at Chandler and Halfrida.

"Don't move!" another shouted.

"Drop the weapons now!" screamed a third.

Perpetua laughed at Halfrida, cracking a smile. Compared to the bomb, three guns pointed at her head was the least of her worries. "How did I not know that you were in my family's house for the past two years?"

"It's called 'espionage,'" Halfrida told her. "Look it up." She warned Chandler and everyone else at the dining hall, waving the detonator aloft. "Nobody try anything funny on me and my boyfriend!" She howled. "I've got enough Semtex on me to kill everyone!"

"Oh, thank God we're all going to die!" Chandler accepted his impending fate and shouted in joyous glee. "*Deus Vult* ('God wills it')!"

"*Deus Vult*!" Halfrida shouted, placing her thumb over the shiny red button.

"You idiot," Perpetua scolded Halfrida, "You're the freaking main character! You're not supposed to be suicide-bombing yourself!" The others begged and pleaded Halfrida not to blow her boyfriend and herself up and meet Jesus at the Bank of Interdimensional Settlements (BIS)–Purgatory.

"I know!" Halfrida shouted back. "All I want is the House of Raynerson to hear me out for once! I demand a personal audience between you, me, my boyfriend, and Emperor Bernard!"

"That's all?" Emperor Bernard bellowed in a puzzled tone.

Halfrida nodded. "Yeah, is that too much to ask?"

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Stone floors, marble walls, and tall ceilings adorned the Imperial Palace's throne room. Sturdy round pillars lined the maroon and gold-lined carpet that stretched from the entranceway to Emperor Bernard's throne at the other side of the chamber. Huge chandeliers suspended from the ceiling. Stained glass windows and ornate painted ceilings depicted events in the House of Raynerson's ancestral past, its trials and triumphs. A stern-faced Christus Rex in ceremonial regalia stood guard beside each pillar.

Seated in His Greatness' Throne, Emperor Bernard sipped on a glass of red wine. A wine bottle stood atop a side-table beside the Throne. Next to the table was Duchess Perpetua, watching Chandler and Halfrida approach the Throne along the red carpet. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of Halfrida.

Halfrida clutched her right arm around Chandler's left. Her boyfriend had been restrained by Perpetua after agreeing to surrender and cooperate with the Underground. Standing in front of the Throne, Halfrida and Chandler genuflected before Emperor Bernard.

"Why are you here?" His Greatness asked Halfrida.

Halfrida paused, stroking her chin, pondering to find the best words to describe what she had learned from Cardinal Wolk. The last thing I'd want to be called by His Greatness is 'conspiracy theorist', she swore to herself.

A few seconds passed, and Emperor Bernard grew impatient. "Well?" His voiced traveled, echoing in the ceiling above.

"Be patient," Duchess Perpetua whispered in His Greatness' ear.

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled and eyed Emperor Bernard. "Your Greatness," she said, "I had come to your Imperial Palace to foil your assassination and to receive a 'favor' from you. The Ostara Conspiracy is making quiet moves to subvert GACSS and Underground through Nazi-sympathizers embedded within RGA High Command and Underground Central Command."

His Greatness' jaw dropped. "So you Ryanites knew?"

She nodded. "We did," Halfrida said, eying and winking at Chandler.

"That's right," Chandler chimed, winking at His Greatness.

Emperor Bernard tilted his head at Duchess Perpetua. "So your reports have some basis in reality?"

"Correct," Perpetua retorted. "Your brother, Prince Kyle, had been running informants inside the Conspiracy for the past two years."

Her Highness must be referring to that conversation I heard in the elevator shaft, Halfrida thought. Memories of her time at Drexel Airbase came to mind. "In that case," she spoke to Duchess Perpetua, "We're both on the same page then?"

"Yes," Perpetua said. "We are not as blind and deaf as you think, Halfrida."

"Since when did I say that?" Halfrida mused.

Perpetua chuckled. "Ask your run-of-the-mill Ryanite."

"Cutting to the chase," His Greatness spoke, "Since the Conspiracy plotted to kill me, I assume they have similar plans for the State Chancellor?"

Halfrida and Chandler nodded. "It would to be so, according to Cardinal Wolk of Philadelphia," Halfrida told His Greatness. "With your assassination curtailed, RGA intelligence is now hard-pressed to stop the Ryanite plotters inside the so-called '*Volksarmee*' ('People's Army'), RGA's home army reserve."

"Unfortunately, we are still at war," Emperor Bernard reminded them. "As Emperor of the House of Raynerson and all Underground, I have zero interest in working alongside you." His Greatness drank the rest of his glass and set it aside on the side table next to the wine bottle.

"But we're facing a nuclear holocaust here!" Halfrida warned. "Something big is going to happen on March 21. Russia and America will be having a nuclear drill on that day. The terrorists will hijack both nations' thermonuclear arsenals and launch them at the two nations."

"What makes this attempt different from the other occasions?" Emperor Bernard responded.

"A computer software program will be able to launch all of them at once," Halfrida elaborated.

"FCIMS?" Perpetua eyebrows rose.

"Yes, Your Highness," Halfrida answered.

"I thought so," Perpetua muttered under her throat.

Chandler eyed Halfrida and Perpetua. "What are you two talking about?"

Perpetua stared at Chandler with a narrow-eyed gaze. "Prince Kyle and Underground intelligence had spent the past ten years or so investigating rumors that ϟϟ Colonel Horst Brotzman may have hijacked America's thermonuclear arsenal on the morning of September 11, 2001."

"Seriously," Chandler voiced, "On 9/11?"

"Look!" Perpetua glared at him. "I have no idea if there's anything to it! What we do know is that the US government's FCIMS software had been compromised before that day. And Version 5.21 was designed to prevent cyberterrorists from hacking their way into launching America's nukes."

That's the first I'm hearing of this. Halfrida's nose crinkled. "What was Horst Brotzman doing on that day, trying to hijack American nuclear weapons?"

"Isn't it any obvious by now?" Perpetua told her. "Washington owed your family a lot of money after helping them fight the Soviets during the Cold War. We know that ϟϟ Colonel Brotzman wanted Washington to pay up on that day."

"But as Americans," Emperor Raynerson chimed, "We can all surmise that the federal government had other priorities."

"I understand," Chandler said to the two Raynersons, "But…you both are suggesting that the Brotzman family had a role to play on 9/11."

"As questionable as it is," Perpetua spoke, "The jury is still out on that." She crossed her arms. "Evidence remains forthcoming…for now."

"In the meantime…" Halfrida pounded the back of her left hand with a clenched fist. "We've got another issue to take into account." Chandler, Duchess Perpetua and Emperor Raynerson laid their eyes on her. "If Cardinal Wolk is correct, then the possible whereabouts of the Plaidfahne and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Golden Rose Clasp is being kept at an Underground installation called 'Fort Redemption.'"

"I haven't heard that name in a while," Perpetua voiced.

Halfrida stroked her chin. "Your Greatness," she addressed Emperor Bernard, "Cardinal Wolk suspects that the terrorists are posing as Underground personnel at Fort Redemption. Now, the RGA has a plan to infiltrate the facility, retrieve the Ryanite relics, and destroy or steal anything of value there."

"And what are you implying?" Emperor Bernard's eyebrows furrowed.

"We ask that you 'turn a blind eye' at a small contingent of Ryanite Nightingales and some Adelburgers as they conduct their business there." Halfrida folded her arms and straightened her posture. "In exchange, he's in your custody until we're finished dealing with the Conspiracy." She gestured at Chandler.

Emperor Bernard pondered for a few minutes, consulting Duchess Perpetua's advice in hushed whispers. When His Greatness made up his mind, Emperor Bernard addressed Halfrida. "I believe the House of Raynerson can make that happen, if given enough plausible deniability."

"Thank you, Your Greatness." Halfrida smiled.

"It's the least I can do to save the world and make some money in the end," Perpetua giggled. "After all, we can't sell Anomalies in a radioactive Earth."

"Are you fine with this, Halfrida?" Chandler questioned her. "You do realize you're making a deal with one of our enemies?"

Halfrida nodded and placed her index finger over her lips. "Duchess Perpetua will be taking care of you at the Imperial Palace." She turned away from the Throne. "Take care of yourself while I'm gone."

"You owe me my freedom after this," Chandler told her.

She smirked. "Of course." Halfrida strutted away from the chamber.

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(*Ten days later*)

21 March, 12AM. Rain fell from dark skies over Arlington and most of the Washington DC area. At Bishop Dowell, the parking lot lay empty. Doors locked for the night. Windows shuttered. Alarm systems compromised. Telephone lines cut. Computer systems hacked. In the junior hallway, State Chancellor Harold Brotzman's Catholic high school, a ventilation hatch embedded on the ceiling opened. Virgil Sapienti leaped out of the air vent, landed feet first on the tiled floor, and rolled a few feet up the hall. He stopped and squatted in front of Harold's locker. The locker, like all the others, lacked a bulletproof padlock.

Shining a flashlight at the locker, Virgil stood upright and opened the door. Inside were two shelves of school textbooks, workbooks, and assorted school supplies. A photograph of Allison Schmidt, Harold's secretary at Plaidstadt, was taped to the interior of the locker door.

Virgil cackled as he rummaged through some spy equipment attached to the field webbing on his person. He took out a hockey puck-shaped SADM (Special Atomic Demolition Munitions), a portable nuclear bomb weighing around a hundred grams. It fitted in the palm of Virgil's hand, resting atop a small block of C4 wired to a fixed timer.

A new timer was planted over the photo of Allison. Virgil rewired the C4 to the SADM and fumbled with the buttons on the SADM. The SADM itself contained an extremely pure sample of Uranium-239, enough to destroy everything around the locker. Anyone unlucky enough to open it or else caught in the immediate blast was bombarded with what amounted to a nuclear shotgun.

The SADM, turned on and squeaked, emitting a faint green glow. The glow illuminated Virgil's face. Smiling, he rubbed his hands in a conniving manner. *He won't see it coming*, he swore to himself.

21 March, 7:39 AM. In a carpeted hallway inside a building, Virgil laid a briefcase in front of the windowsill, crouching, his head below the window. Inside the briefcase was a field-stripped Walther WA2000, a bullpup sniper rifle designed in response to the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre. Chambered for custom-made, low-velocity .308 Winchester rounds, the sniper rifle featured a reinforced carbon fiber barrel, a bolt-action mechanism, and a durable, lightweight frame. Virgil assembled the weapon, screwing a long, slender silencer into the barrel, and loading a single .308 Winchester round into the chamber.

Pushing the bolt forward closed the chamber. He stood up, leaned against the windowsill, set up the rifle's sturdy bipod, and looked down its high-powered scope. Outside, a gray Chevy Silverado rolled along the street in front of his building. On the other side of the road were the grounds of St. Eustace Catholic High School for Girls. The school, like Neumann-Seton, was built out of an old parish serving German-Americans for generations.

The reticule swayed. Virgil steadied his aim. An American flag fixed to a flagpole beyond the three-story school building flapped back and forth. A strong wind blew against Virgil's face. Sunlight beamed through an opening in the one of the clouds above.

A group of girls, all of them uniformed St. Eustace students, strolled up the sidewalk between the school and the road. Backpacks strapped to her backs, handbags slung over shoulders, bagels and cups of coffee in their hands. *Hannelore Bauer must be among them*. Virgil adjusted the scope's magnification, zooming on the girls' faces. None of them looked like Hannelore. The girls walked away from the view of his vantage point.

Virgil moved the reticule away from sidewalk and searched for her inside one of the windows on the school's third floor. A tall red-head stood erect by an opened window. She was clad in the school's uniform, chatting with someone. It

was Hannelore Bauer, heiress of Bauer Industries. *Try not to move*, Virgil sneered. Inhaling a breeze of fresh air, he took a deep breath and held it for several seconds. The shakiness in hands subsided. The reticule over Hannelore's head steadied. His heartbeats slowed down to a slow thump.

Hannelore walked away from the window. Virgil pulled the trigger. A muffle gunshot broke out. Glass shattered. Sounds of Hannelore moaning in pain ripped through the walls of St. Eustace like an avalanche. Girls inside the building screamed in terror as they sought cover, rushing away from the windows.

8:00AM. As soon as word spread that Harold was presumed dead, Ulrich and Heinricka kicked down the doors of the State Chancellor's office in Plaidstadt. Hi-Standard HDMs drawn, they spotted three neo-Nazi terrorists dressed in all black and Balaclava masks behind Harold's desk. Two men with Kalashnikovs hovered behind a third as he was typing away on the PC.

The Cousins shot the three men in the head before they had a chance to react. The terrorists dropped dead, spilling their blood all over their twin cousins' Persian rug. Ulrich and Heinricka rushed into the room and dragged the bodies away from the desk.

"Hurry," Ulrich urged, pointing at the PC "Log onto the FCIMS now!"

Heinricka shoved the third terrorist away and went to work on the computer. She logged onto SuperEnigma and ran the FCIMS program.

Cousin Ulrich stood beside her, watching the computer slowly load the software. The satphone in Ulrich's pocket vibrated and rang. He picked it up. "Cousin Halfrida, is that you?" Ulrich spoke into it.

"Yes," Halfrida answered.

"Where the hell are you?" he shouted. "Harold and your parents are dead, a coup in Castle Blackstone is underway, and there's another at Offutt and Barksdale AFBs through FCIMS!"

"I'm trying to save Harold, Cousin!" she grumbled. "His Greatness somehow managed to convince his niece, Duchess Perpetua, to see things our way for once! We won't have to deal with the Underground for now!"

"But Harold's dead!" he screamed.

"No," she retorted, "He's going to be alright! Wait and see!"

"What's going on out there?"

"Listen, the President needs to Barksdale and Offutt to stop the Conspiracy from unleashing all of America's nukes at Mother Russia. I need you and Cousin Heinricka to alert Peter MacDonald and cover Air Force One."

"Shouldn't we leave that to Washington?"

"The Conspiracy's got the US military by the freaking balls!"

"*Verdamm*t!" Ulrich sighed and covered his forehead with his other hand. Out of frustration, he kicked the State Chancellor's desk.

Halfrida yelled at him. "What are you waiting for, Cousin? Go! Don't worry about whatever I'm doing!" She hung up.

J. N. ENRIQUEZ

Chapter Twenty Six: Failure Of Imagination (Ryanite Chorus; March 21st, 2014)

"There are ways. The United States isn't completely invulnerable."

-Mohamed Atta speaking to Shahid Nickels, ca. 1999

March 21, 8:15AM. Words like 'impossible' were never in Harold and Halfrida's vocabulary, let alone in their whole family. For every Brotzman, anything in life was possible, if given the right motive, enough money, the right personnel and technical know-how, and a few dashes of Carl Jung's 'Meaningful Coincidences'. Everything else boiled down to their camouflaged triple-layered veil of ignorance, secrecy, and biased conspiracy theories.

Truth is stranger than fiction in a novel full of realities. Harold and Halfrida shared the same dream every night. Harold's comatose after Virgil bombed him on the morning of March 21, 2014 was no different. For years, the twins' dream always began the same way: two voices chatting in complete darkness. Forever aware of their family's past, both twins intimately knew their names.

"'And I'd like to know," a French-Greek-Italian Hindu woman asked, "'Can we have any hope?'"

"'Why do you say, 'Can we have any hope?'"' an elderly Swedish explorer questioned. "Do you have no hope?'"

"'Those of Nürnberg,'" she cried, "'They have killed them.'"

"'Don't fear,'" he reassured her. "'Germany has more such men.'"

"'Yes, but when will they appear?'" she pondered.

"'They'll appear in time,'" he replied.

"'What about the Führer?'" she wondered. "'Is he dead or alive?'"

"'Whether Hitler's dead or alive,'" the old man answered, "'He's *eternal*.'" His voice echoed into the blackened void before fading.

The sun rose from the east over New York City on September 11, 2001. It was, as Ronald Reagan had promised, 'morning again in America'. Vast canyons of neon, concrete, steel, and glass stretched across all of Lower Manhattan. Hundreds of cars zipped up and down the streets. On the sidewalks, scores of locals hurried to work, while aimless tourists wandered to the next landmark.

City Hall Park was situated a few blocks away from the World Trade Center. A sacred, holy temple to American consumerism, materialism, and commerce was housed there. The Twin Towers loomed overhead like the twin pillars of Jachin and Boaz at the Old Testament Temple of Jerusalem, or else the twin pillars of the same name inside a Freemasonic lodge. Two planes, an American Airlines Boeing 767-223ER and a United Airlines Boeing 767-222, had yet to fly into each Tower.

A canvas was mounted atop a wooden easel on the footpath beside a bench inside the park. Harold, the-aspiring-painter-turned-State-Chancellor, worked on his personal reproduction of Franz Ritter von Stuck's 1889 painting *Die Wilde Jagd* ('The Wild Hunt'). His paintbrush painted a dark and grisly image of the impending chaos.

THE PLAID DREAM

Halfrida sat cross-legged on the edge of the bench, reading *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today*. Her eyes were glued to the book, documenting her family's corporate handiwork during the Weimar years. She flipped through the pages.

A stack of dull and explosive books were piled in a stack beside her. Thick tomes with names like *Infiltration: How Heinrich Himmler Schemed to Build an SS Industrial Empire*, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, and *Jihad: Made in Germany*.

Harold stopped painting and turned to her. "What do you think of it, Halfrida?" he asked, stroking his chin, eyes fixed to the painting ahead of them.

Halfrida stared at the painting in silence. A Hitler-like entity rallied and gathered bands of hunters to rain death from above, heralding national catastrophes of war and terrorism. For the painting predicted and even served as a source of inspiration for Adolf Hitler.

A tear fell out of Halfrida's eye. Cracking a smile, she whimpered, "It's beautiful…" She clapped her hands. "You got a second?"

"What is it?" Harold mused. An eyebrow rose.

She rummaged her fingers through the stack of books beside her and grabbed *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*. Opening it, she read aloud her favorite passage, highlighted in bright yellow. "'It has become evident during recent years that major wars in the nuclear age will be fewer than those in the past but individual and group terrorism will increase steadily. Skorzeny and his commandos during the Third Reich and Skorzeny and his ODESSA members during the postwar years were leaders in modern day terroristic tactics. Skorzeny's followers and students adhere to his teachings today.'"

"I know, right?" Harold chuckled. "Horst and our family told us that terrorists were going to fly planes into buildings, and to stay away from tall buildings like World Trade Center." He rolled his eyes. "Yet some people thought he was a senile conspiracy theorist."

"People these days don't know what they're talking about, Harold." She searched for another passage in the book. "'They don't realize our Opa Stahlsebastian, Horst, and their other brother Arno are terrorists! They were recruited by Skorzeny to partake in a false-flag operation called 'Operation Greif.'"

"English-speaking Waffen-SS commandos dress up in American and British Army uniforms to commit, by today's standards, terrorism," Harold said. "Opa and his brothers came close to putting a bullet in Eisenhower's head, JFK-style."

Halfrida snapped her fingers. "Or that one time when Opa Sebastian, Horst, and Reinhard Heydrich ran those special terrorist training camps for Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary group that later formed the Israeli Defense Force."

"Whoa!" Harold's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

"Ask Horst or Opa the next time you see either," she told him.

"And here I wondered where were some of the counterfeit US Dollars and Pound Sterling notes that concentration camp inmates forged for Opa, Horst, and Heinrich Himmler in 'Operation Bernhard.'" Harold chuckled. "Could that fake money fund paramilitary terrorists, political parties, weapons, and governments?"

She nodded. "Why not, if Cross Financial gave you your own personal account in the Bank of International Settlements, a bank as sovereign and extraterritorial as the Vatican, the UN, or even CERN?"

"Weren't we also the middlemen between Nazis and neo-Nazis on both sides of the Iron Curtain? The middlemen between Reinhard Gehlen's *Gehlenorg*–the BND, Otto-Ernst Remer and Eastern European neo-Nazis?"

"Uh-huh," Halfrida giggled. "We donated millions of dollars to Father Charles Coughlin, Bishops Thomas Molloy and Alois Hudal, and Francis Cardinal Spellman. We bankrolled Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen and his show, *Life is Worth Living*. We fed intelligence to Senator Joseph McCarthy in our war against the 'Rosenfelds' and we whacked him when he betrayed us."

The twins laughed away at the story Horst told them and their cousins on 9/11. In the 1950s, the Brotzmans kidnapped President Dwight Eisenhower and hauled him away to the family estate, issuing a ransom to the Eisenhower administration. The Americans gave the family billions of dollars, Eisenhower was freed, and the Brotzmans 'persuaded' Ufologists that Eisenhower was brought to Edwards AFB to meet extraterrestrials, not Secret Service agents.

"Didn't Opa say that Eisenhower was also a war criminal who should have been hanged alongside our whole family at the Nuremberg trials?" Harold mused.

"Or how we *blackmailed* the Allies and were only mentioned in passing at the Nuremberg trials?" Halfrida continued in vain to search for another relevant saying in *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*. "We were in Egypt when we overthrew King Farouk and installed Gamal Abdel Nasser."

Harold chuckled. "In the Sixties, we attended the funeral of Blessed Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, bankrolled George Lincoln Rockwell, and backed Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre after Vatican II. We were with Hjalmar Schacht when we visited Suharto's Indonesia. We had terrorist conferences in Barcelona, Spain with stellar people like Otto Skorzeny, Yasser Arafat, and François Genoud."

"And let's never forget about how we ran narcotics and guns for various people," Halfrida added. "Like, that time our family and Klaus Barbie flew tons of cocaine into the US in the Seventies to fund neo-Nazi paramilitaries. How we provided 'inspiration' behind Gaddafi's *Green Book*."

Harold's eyebrows rose. "Wasn't that when we backed Ayatollah Khomeini in overthrowing the Shah and fighting Saddam's Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War?"

"Yes," Halfrida said. "We also infiltrated the US government again while Ronald Reagan was turning the White House into his retirement home."

"Our contributions to the 'World Anti-Communist League' (WACL), what's now the 'World League for Freedom and Democracy' (WLFD)?" Harold said.

"And when the Soviets were driven back, we helped some neo-Nazis unite East and West Germany, crack up Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Hell, we once called some people up about this 'business' we had in Bosnia."

A Boeing 767, painted in American Airlines livery, roared along the Hudson in the distance. It zoomed over the Manhattan skyline at high speed. The Brotzman twins scanned the skies above for American Airlines Flight 11.

"Speaking of which," Harold chimed, "Didn't we also bankroll Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda through François Genoud?"

Halfrida nodded. "Yes, yes, we did," she confessed. "Isn't it also ironic how Mohamed Atta was a part of the *Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft*, an American-German government student exchange program founded in 1949?"

Harold shivered in terror at the mere mention of Carl Duisberg's name. "Th-that's the head of Bayer AG and one of the founding members of IG Farben!"

"I only state the facts, Harold," Halfrida told him. "9/11 was definitely *not* an 'inside job', but a colossal failure of imagination!"

The loud engine noises overhead became deafening. Harold and Halfrida tilted their chins upward at the clear, blue sky. They spotted Flight 11 flying over their heads, zooming toward the North Tower like Earl Turner from *The Turner Diaries*. Flight 11 slammed into the northern façade. The Boeing passenger jet disintegrated as it crashed through steel, glass, and concrete. Explosions, flames, and black smoke plumed out of an exposed hole on the upper floors.

Harold sat beside his sister on the bench. He and Halfrida looked away from the hole and read *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando* together. They shared the book, each twin holding one side with one of their hands. Sirens wailed, people screamed, and cars honked in the background. NYPD cruisers, several firetrucks, and a few ambulances sped by on the road in front of the twins.

A dozen terrorized New Yorkers in business suits, having fled the inferno at the World Trade Center, ran past them. One man tripped, staggered, and knocked over Harold's painting and easel. Dark oil paint smudged and smeared his light gray two-piece suit.

The man shouted at the twins. "Why are you kids not at school? Come on, get out of here!"

The twins ignored him. The man's coworkers helped him get back on his feet. The man and his coworkers ran off to Broadway. Traveling past them was another dozen tourists with cameras. They stopped by the twins to film and snap photos of the hole on the North Tower. Nobody paid attention to the twins.

Minutes later, a loud crashing sound ricocheted through the air. A United Airlines plane, Flight 175, tilted leftward as it rammed straight into the South Tower. Another explosion erupted, flames and smoke pouring out of a slanted gash on the upper floors of the South Tower. Dozens and dozens of more terrorized office workers from the World Trade Center fled past the twins. More firetrucks and ambulances drove on the road to the World Trade Center.

For Harold, the morning still felt like a normal day for him and Halfrida, having found the other passage his sister cherished since childhood. "'Terrorism,'" he muttered, "'The Skorzeny Syndrome, is flourishing in the modern world, a reminder that Hitler and Nazism are still taking their toll more than three decades after the Third Reich collapsed.'"

Halfrida closed the book. "Harold, we better get going." She got up, brushed her khaki pleated knee-length skirt, and grabbed her books. "I have a feeling those Twin Towers are going to collapse again and again."

"'Let's roll.'" Harold nodded. *Gosh, why does everything feel like déjà vu?* Unbeknownst to him, Virgil's bomb worked, but he survived and was sent to the hospital in a comatose state. Things were a different story in the Real World.

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Back in the Real World, life imitated 'a novel full of realities', a cross between a wicked parody of the 9/11 attacks, the dark fantasies of Adolf Hitler, and some very brutal German neo-Nazi literary art. 9/11 was supposed to be the 'conspiracy theory to end all conspiracy theories'. Every Brotzman saw it as 'World War II under a new name': to make Nazism come back and rebuild the Third Reich.

8:46AM. Representative Accardo and his Nightingales presided over a nationwide evacuation of Plaidstadt and all Republic and Convention Program members from all Catholic high schools and universities in the entire United States. Neo-Nazi terrorists, dressed in RGA uniforms, raided key facilities of Ryanite allies in *Neudeutschland* and Europe, taking hundreds hostage.

8:50AM. In Castle Blackstone, rogue Ryanite generals of the RGA's reserve home army, the *Volksarmee*, staged a coup d'état against RGA loyalists among High Command, the regular army and elite Adelburgers. Street battles engulfed the Ryanite capital of Wonderland, as Adelbu MAFVs and troops fought the traitors and their terrorist allies in brutal house-to-house fighting. Shotguns banged, while shovels clobbered, and trench knives stabbed. Fortified buildings shelled with mortars, entire city blocks lobbed with multiple artillery shells.

9:00AM. The Ostara Conspiracy struck America again in another surprise attack. The terrorists, having exploited GACSS' access to the FCIMS software, rode into the US government's computer networks. Presidential authorization codes for 'COCKED PISTOL' acquired and used. America's armed forces placed on DEFCON 1–a defensive readiness condition *higher than* 9/11 and the Cuban Missile Crisis combined.

Across the Earth, US Navy nuclear submarines prepared to launch their nuclear-tipped Lockheed-Martin Trident D5 SLBMs (Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles). Air raid sirens wailed in every US military base. *Hijacked* US Air Force B1, B2, and B52 bombers, all laden with nuclear bombs, took off from US airbases at home and in Germany and Japan. Missile silos began countdown sequences to their Boeing LGM-30G Minuteman III ICBMs.

9:03AM. US and NATO troops in Europe received forged orders to invade Poland and Russia like the Wehrmacht and Waffen-ϟϟ troops of old in Operation Barbarossa. European Prime Ministers, Presidents, and nobility placed on house arrest by their bodyguards, all of them under orders by the Conspiracy. In Asia, Japanese ultranationalists seized the National Diet, 'reinstated' the Imperial Family, and suspended Article 9. Japanese Self-Defense Forces joined American and South Korean troops preparing to invade North Korea and China.

With FCIMS still in their hands, the Conspiracy took the US military and government hostage. They detonated bombs at Catholic schools throughout the continental United States, sabotaged critical American transportation, communications, and power lines across multiple states.

9:06AM. A threatening call against the President was received on the White House switchboard. "Guten Morgen, Air Force One–Callsign 'FENRIR'–is next," A teenage boy in a thick German accent warned in a deadpan tone. "*In Amerika reitet der Tod* (Death is coming to America)! *Heil Hitler*!" He hung up.

Neo-Nazis posing as US Delta Force operators dragged Vice President Fitzgerald and other prominent White House officials out of the compound. Neo-Nazis posing as US Navy SEALs and CIA agents stormed the Capitol Building and waved their guns inside an emergency session of Congress, placing all of them under house arrest.

Secret Service agents armed with Stinger anti-air missile launchers paced around the roof of the White House, scanning the skies for the US Air Force. F-15s, F-16s, and F-22 fighter jets prowled the skies over Washington for the terrorists' air force. The SS agents fired Stinger missiles at the patrolling jets, bringing down several. Federal Aviation Administration ordered all civilian planes to land at the nearest US airport.

9:11AM. The Capitol Building, White House, Pentagon, Washington Monument, and other important US landmarks evacuated. Thousands of government and military officials ran out of various buildings like on 9/11. Terrorists warned they won't kill the hostages if someone foiled their quest, because they promised to kill them regardless.

9:30AM. Sarasota, Florida: the City of Paradise. President Wolff finished reading a sad, depressing children's storybook about 9/11 to classroom of 4th graders at a Catholic school. A storybook entitled, *America Is Under Attack*. The schoolchildren, joyful and happy, applauded the President for fueling their growing appetite for uniforms, marching columns, and an enthusiasm for war.

Secret Service agents, under forged orders from the Ostara Conspiracy, whisked the President away into their custody. They dragged the President, kicking and screaming, to the motorcade, the 'SS' men rammed the vehicles through morning traffic, crashing through motorists and running over pedestrians.

9:57AM. Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport. Adelburgers from the *Panzer-Division* '*Leibgarde Harold Brotzman*'–'Harold's Lifeguards'–ambushed the SS motorcade inside the hangar housing Air Force One. A vulgar gunfight ensued. President Wolff was freed and, together with the Adelburgers, hijacked Air Force One and ditched the press corps chasing after him.

9:58AM. Air Force One rocketed down the airport tarmac and flew up into the stratosphere. A large flight of Ryanite A-Wing fighters, led by Ulrich Brotzman and Peter MacDonald, traveled alongside it. An even larger flight of Conspiracy Magic Eye flying discs chased after them as Air Force One rolled and rocked in the air on the way to Barksdale and Offutt AFB to prevent nuclear annihilation. A massive dogfight between the Ryanites and terrorists engulfed America's skies.

9:59AM. President Howard Wolff on Air Force One got calls from Afghanistan, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Chile, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, 'Federal Republic of Germany', Great Britain, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Libya, Netherlands, New Zealand, Palestine, Paraguay,

Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey. They were all trying to warn.

10:06AM. US troops under Conspiracy control rolled past Poland's *Oder-Neiße* line and the Korean Demilitarized Zone. World leaders feared the worst: the President was a Conspiracy stooge realizing his childhood dreams of launching American nukes at random countries. The Kremlin and Beijing, fearing invasions, placed all their armed forces on the highest state of combat readiness.

10:15AM. Everyday life in America and elsewhere continued. Few people realized what was going on. Computer logic bombs went off inside the computers controlling the world's stock markets, slowly wiping out critical financial data and syphoning trillions of US dollars away. Panicked shareholders and investors rushed to withdrew their savings. A new Great Depression loomed over the horizon.

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10:30AM. But the truth was far from the lies. An innocuous Spanish family villa rested atop an alpine plateau along the Andes Mountains. Its imposing walls and gates divided the estate from its sole lifeline to civilization–a winding asphalt road. The road itself stretched along miles of foothills to a sleepy resort town called San Carlos de Bariloche.

The sun had yet to rouse her rosy fingers over the family estate. Loudspeakers mounted within and without the mansion's walls crackled. An old, scratchy recording of *Der Tod in Flandern* (Death in Flanders), a German folk song from World War I, played. Ominous and apocalyptic, it heralded the dawn of September 11, 2001. Past the twin front doors, a large lobby with tile floors and a gold-lined stairway. An oil painting of the estate's owner, ϟϟ Obersturmbannführer (Lieutenant Colonel) Horst Brotzman in his officer's uniform, greeted visitors and family members alike as they entered.

A then-four-year old Harold hurried along the villa's second floor halls, the carpeted floors muffling his movements. In his hands was a sealed envelope, an important letter inside it. He stopped at the door of his twin sister's guest room and opened the door with both hands. He went in, closed the door behind him, and pushed his sister's arm at the bedside. "Please wake up, Halfrida," Harold spoke to his twin sister in a soft voice.

Halfrida yawned and rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?" Hands wrapped around the edges of her blanket, she bent her torso upward and scanned the room, looking for a Cuckoo clock on the wall.

"Not important," he said. "I just woke up from a terrible dream. Planes crashed into buildings not far from where Mom and Dad work and all of New York were bathed in nuclear fire and radiation!"

"You've been watching too many Tom Clancy movies, haven't you?" Halfrida crossed her arms. "*The Sum of All Fears*, I presume?"

"I'm serious!" he cried.

"Alright, I'll give you the benefit of a doubt," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Horst, Opa Sebastian, and the rest of our family are about to go to war against the US and Russian governments and their allies!" Someone stomped on

the carpeted floor near the door. He and Halfrida waited until the footsteps faded into the background. Unbeknownst to the twins, Cousin Ulrich eavesdropped on them before crawling back to his room.

Harold gave her the envelope. Halfrida looked at the envelope, turning it over and back. "What's this?"

"My letter to you," Harold clarified. "Today is going to be a big day for our family. There is no turning back. Horst wants everyone to refight World War II under a new name, sis." He took back the envelope. "You should write a letter to me as part of a time capsule."

"Fine." Halfrida got out of bed and strolled into a walk-in wardrobe.

The dark blue skies over the estate brightened. Dawn drew closer with each passing minute. The Brotzman twins snuck out of their family estate through the front gates. Halfrida lugged around a shovel and a reinforced steel box, her brother holding onto their envelopes to each other. Outside the estate, they ran along the winding road and traveled away on a dirt path into a nearby forest. They followed it to the summit of a nearby hill across from the estate grounds.

Even from afar, the twins still heard the loudspeakers playing the same song. In their march uphill, the twins passed by several German *Flurkreuze* ('Wayside Crosses') their family had erected along the trail in the decades after World War II. These stone crosses bore a stainless-steel Catholic Crucifix protected under a wooden handcrafted roof. Below each Crucifix was a small indented hole with a small ceramic statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary inside.

Seeing these crosses calmed Harold's nerves and eased the anxieties from last night's dream. Halfway along the trail, a white dove with an olive branch landed on the roof on one of the *Flurkreuze*. Harold spotted the dove. He kneeled in front of the *Flurkreuz*, made a sign of the cross, and prayed for his parents, the beads on his five-decade Rosary keeping track of his Hail Maries and Our Fathers. 9/11 was a Tuesday, which meant praying the Sorrowful Mysteries.

Halfrida proceeded to the summit without him. From the summit, realizing that he was no longer following her, she ran down the hill and returned to his side. "We don't have much time left, Harold," she panted.

"I know…," he said, "But Mom and Dad…"

She rested the shovel over her left shoulder like a rifle, the steel box clutched around her right arm. "What do you think will happen if Horst or someone else finds out that we're out here?"

Nodding his head, Harold sighed. "Of course." He made the sign of the cross again and followed Halfrida, staying close to her side. The twins continued following the dirt path to the summit of the hill.

At summit stood two *Flurkreuze* between a wall with bouquet flowers at the base. A special memorial was erected by the Brotzman family. Painted on the top of the wall in Gothic blackletter were the words '*Der Gott der Eisen Wachsen Ließ, der Wollte Keine Knechte!*' (God, who grew the iron, wanted no slaves!). Below the inscription were nine painted cast-iron shields, each bearing the coat of arms for the territories Germany lost after World War II. A plaque was chiseled above each

shield. From left to right, they read: *Ostpreußen*, *Danzig*, *Westpreußen*, *Pommern*, *Ostbrandenburg*, *Schlesien*, *Oberschlesian*, *Sudetenland*, and *Posen.*

"East Prussia, Danzig, West Prussia, Pomerania, East Brandenburg, Silesia, Upper Silesia, Sudeten, Posen…" Harold murmured the names in English. He and his sister spent a few silent minutes in front of the memorial. This memorial had been built to remind Brotzman family descendants of the ancestral land they had lost. Land that Horst Brotzman and other family and associates sought to recapture by launching America and Russia's thermonuclear arsenals at the cities of both nations. Frontier justice served in nuclear fire and radiation.

"Think it will happen?" Halfrida turned to her brother.

"I don't know, sis," he answered.

The twins dug a hole on the ground in front of the memorial. They placed their envelopes to each other inside the steel box, their time capsule, and dumped it into the hole. They took turns covering the hole with layers of dirt. The sun rose and shined her rosy fingers over the twins' faces.

The twins covered their eyes with their hands. "It's almost time…," Harold said, his little body shivering and trembling.

"A prayer or two would go a long way right about now," Halfrida blurted.

With the shovel, the twins hurried back to their family estate. Neither Harold nor Halfrida would ever learn of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC for the next five years.

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11:00AM. The Conspiracy manipulated FCIMS again. Flying discs had flown over American, Russia, and Chinese ICBM silos and manually started launch countdown sequences, overriding all hopes in aborting the launches. ICBMs flew upward into clear, blue skies. Hitler and the Third Reich returning at 11:09AM.

11:01AM. RGA and Underground A-Wings, determined to restore chaos in the world, pursued the hijacked nuclear bombers and ICBMs. Faster than conventional military jets, they pursued the rogue nukes and bombers while shooting each other down again.

11:08AM. The ICBMs, as if controlled by other A-Wing pilots, played cat and mouse with the Ryanites and Underground. All were shot down with laser machine guns, plasma cannons, unguided rockets, air-to-air missiles and their own A-Wings. Those who collided also ejected themselves from their headsets seconds before impact. Hijacked American nuclear bombers were shot down by pro-Ryanite A-Wings of the Catholic School International (CSI) before they could reach their targets.

11:09AM. President Wolff reasserted personal authority over FCIMS and the remaining American thermonuclear arsenal. Russian and Chinese nuclear bombers were turned away from the continental United States. Nuclear submarines sailed away from their attack positions, not far from American, Russian, and Chinese shores. The President had called it a 'part-time job'.

12:00PM. Life continued. A nuclear Holocaust, a nuclear 9/11 averted. All Conspiracy agents and paramilitaries ordered to escape by the Fascist devil.

Chapter Twenty Seven: Where Is Halfrida? (Renate and Plaid Eminence; Apr. 20-Jun. 8, 2014)

"What on Earth was my sister thinking when she escaped Fort Redemption on her own?"

-Harold Brotzman

Yodeling blared out of various loudspeakers mounted on wooden poles on the roadsides around the grounds of Fort Redemption. Nazi battle flags fluttered against the early morning sunrise at half-mast. Today was the 125th birthday of *Reichskanzler* Adolf Hitler. Large posters of the Führer were plastered on the walls around the former Underground installation.

As with most Underground military installations, Fort Redemption came equipped with an A-Wing airfield, MAFV motor pools, underground bunkers, and concrete structures surrounded by tall walls topped with razor-sharp concertina wires and fixed guard tops sporting searchlights and machine gun nests.

Outside was as dark as *Kristallnacht*. The sun had yet to rise. Snow fell from the gray skies above the alpine plateau upon which Fort Redemption was situated. Pine trees nested atop hills and valleys along a snowy trail from the summit to the base of a mountain, the nearest sign of civilization being a one-way railroad junction to Other-Boston.

The Bavarian yodeling came to an abrupt screech. Somebody had changed the music to old, scratchy German Wehrmacht recordings of *Deutschland über alles*. A chorus of German voices chanted German greatness out of the loudspeakers. "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt!*"

The *Horst-Wessel-Lied* was later played after *Deutschland über alles*.

Somewhere, in the deepest, lowest bowels of Fort Redemption, armored trains carried munitions, supplies, railway artillery guns and other 'valuables' to various parts of the installation from a central location. A 'Skunkworks', an important research base, for Conspiracy's paramilitary forces was housed there.

Halfrida sat in a fetal position on the floor of a damp, dirty prison cell, waiting for someone to liberate her. She had been held in captivity since March 28, after resurrecting her brother from his coma by disabling a computer controlling the subdermal implant inside his brain. *I…I've got to find my stuff and get the hell back to the Dweller World, but how?* She got back on her feet. *I can't let Harold down by rotting in this damn place! I've got to get out of here!*

Cracking her knuckles, stretching her arms, she walked up to a thick steel door. Hands wrapped around the bars of the door, she wiggled it. The door had been locked into place. She turned away from the door and searched around the cell for a way out.

On the wall above her cell's bed was a ventilation port cover. The port looked big enough to fit her whole body. She gawked between the port and the bed. *The bed's springs are still good enough for me to jump up to the port and open it without anyone noticing.* She made the sign of the cross, got up on the bed and jumped up and down, pulling the port open. A loud popping sound erupted.

"What was that?" a sentry outside the cell door shouted.

Crap, they heard me! In a hurry, Halfrida climbed head-first into the port and crawled through the air vent before anyone else could notice her escape. The further she went, the dimmer and smaller the path in front of her became. A few spots of lights peered through the slits of ventilation ports on the bottom of the air vent.

Air raid sirens and alarms wailed outside the air vent. Halfrida continued through the air vent, unaware of what was occurring on the surface. A larger ventilation port appeared on her right. She stopped and peeked through the steel grating on the port.

The port provided a good view of a storage room from the ceiling. The room was well-lit and filled with metal cabinets containing the personal belongings of inmates. A lone terrorist, dressed in Bundeswehr surplus fatigues, sat behind a desk with a pair of headphones. The desk was lined against a brick wall. Nobody else besides him was inside the room.

Now, can I open this thing…? Halfrida fumbled with the ventilation port, her bare hands struggling to pry it open. When she got it opened, she jumped out and rolled on the hard ground without making too much noise. She pulled out a roll of piano wire, extended it to a full meter, and snuck up to the terrorist at the desk.

In a swift motion, Halfrida wrapped the piano wire around the terrorist's neck. A struggle ensued between the two, as the terrorist placed his hands over Halfrida's lower arms, trying to break free. Halfrida tightened her grip on the piano wire, severing her victim's carotid artery, cracking his windpipe.

The flow of blood to his brain severed, his lungs suffocating, the terrorist slumped over the desk chair. Halfrida kneeled beside the cadaver and placed her fingers over his neck. No pulse. "Dead," she muttered.

She searched through the cabinets and found her Cz75 Tactical Sports and her Bishop Dowell uniform. Shedding her prison garb and changing into her school uniform, she inserted a spare magazine into her Cz75 and cocked it. *Alright, once I blow this whole place up, I'm getting out of here.*

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In the skies east of Redemption, twenty St. Gandolph Ga215 Heavy Ground Attack Planes appeared. A-Wings based on the tank-slaying Henschel Hs-129, they carried revolving autocannons, cluster bombs and air-to-ground missiles. Entering Fort Redemption's immediate airspace, the planes circled the base like vultures near a rotting carcass.

On the ground, startled Conspiracy soldiers returned fire on the Remnants planes. AA gun crews dashed to their FlaK guns and cannons, determined to repel the strafing planes. At the rooftop of the third story building, one crew managed to man a Bofors AA gun.

The gun crew, in a frantic hurry, rotated their cannon at two Ga215s circling at high speed. With both planes in their sights, they fired a barrage of shells. Scoring direct hits, the engines of the two planes caught on fire. The crew watched them spiral out of the morning sky, crashing into the forest.

But from their rear flank, a lone Ga215 flew towards them. The plane strafed the roof, firing its plasma and laser cannons. In retaliation, the plane slayed the AA crew and delivered a bomb on the roof. The bomb detonated, sending parts of the Bofors gun and its fallen crew flying.

Among the A-Wing pilots flying the Ga215s, Ulrich radioed an incoming fleet of black Huey helicopters. "Plaid Eminence to friendly ground forces," he announced, "All AA guns neutralized. Send in the Nightingales!"

Smoke canisters were landed atop rooftops and landing pads. Black Huey helicopters, bearing RGA roundels, transported a joint contingent of Remnants soldiers and Nightingales. Upon entering the base's perimeter, the pilots spotted green smoke emanating from at various sites. The smoke signified marked ideal sites for LZs.

From the ground, the surviving Conspiracy soldiers took potshots at the encroaching choppers. The door gunners on the Hueys, armed with MG42s, shot at anything that moved. The choppers hovered over the green smoke. The choppers delivered their troops to each LZ. Nightingales and few Remnants jumped out of the Hueys and scoured the base for the Plaidfahne, the Golden Rose Clasp of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Halfrida Brotzman.

At an intersection, a two-story barracks appeared up ahead. Its doors and windows had been boarded up with plywood prior to their arrival. Poking out of the gaps between the plywood boards, the gun barrel of an MG34 peppered the Nightingales as they rushed toward the intersection.

Bullets whizzed past Accardo and his Nightingales. Accardo screamed and pointed at a small Quonset hut on their right flank. "Get inside, people!" He rushed inside, the others following him.

Sheltered inside the steel structure, they manned the windows and exchanged potshots with the Conspiracy machine gunner inside the barracks. The machine gun rounds kept coming. Pinned down, Accardo crouched up to Joseph. "Get Drusilla to bring her Maurice II/G," he shouted over the gunfire.

"You got it!" Joseph reached for the telephone set connected to the field radio on his back. Pressing the receiver against his ear, he barked at Drusilla over the radio. "Dewy-Princess, get your MAFV up here now!"

Over the base, Drusilla and her crew operated their old Maurice II/G from a Huey chopper circling inner perimeter. The driver, radio operator, and gunner were all seated on one bench. Drusilla sat on the chair behind the copilot. All four had their headsets and controllers, visors showing them live-feed images of the cameras mounted on their MAFV.

"Dewy-Princess, do you read me?" Joseph wailed. The enemy machine gun roared in the background.

"We're getting there, we're getting there!" Drusilla shouted back.

"Enemy machine gunner nested in the barrack ahead!" Joseph whined. "We're pinned! Take him down for us, will you?"

The Maurice II/G rolled up the road to the motor pool. It continued until reaching the intersection between the hut and the barracks. The gunner rotated the

turret with a joystick on his handheld controller. His visor showed a green reticule pointing at the second floor.

A plasma bolt collided with the right side of the building. A big explosion erupted upstairs. Smoke poured of the blast radius. When it subsided, half of the wall on the second floor was blown away. The enemy machine gunner posted at a window near the wall emerged from the explosion unscathed. His body armor absorbed much of the impact.

The Maurice's gunner tore him to shreds with the coaxial laser machine gun.

"Driver," Drusilla called out, "Forward!"

"Yes ma'am!" The driver pressed down on the acceleration button on his controller.

The Maurice II/G rolled past the Quonset hut and the barracks, racing toward a motor pool at the end of the road up ahead. Accardo and the other Nightingales exited the hut. They traveled in a single-file formation, Accardo taking point on everyone's behalf.

A hexagonal building topped with a large copper dome, the motor pool housed more than the base's vehicles and MAFVs. Everyone knew the Conspiracy had one last secret in the underground floor below.

At the gates of the motor pool, the Lovers, Walther and Isolde, ran out of a nearby building. A two-story concrete bunker with Nazi flags hanging over windows and dead neo-Nazis littering the ground outside. A bomb planted somewhere inside exploded, collapsing the whole building in a big plume of smoke. Walther carried the Plaidfahne on a flagpole slung over his back, his wife, Isolde, trailing behind him with the Golden Rose Clasp of Nathaniel Hawthorne, kept in its jewelry box inside her satchel. Since the Lovers were also tasked with rescuing Halfrida, the absence of their favorite goddaughter concerned and worried Hannelore, Lance, Joseph, Percival, Jennifer and Representative Accardo.

The *Dewy-Princess* stopped at a locked gate to the entrance of the motor pool, its engine rumbling as it rocked back and forth after its driver held down the emergency brake. The Lovers dashed past it and stopped behind its chassis. They waved at the Nightingales and their fellow Jackbooters as they raced each other along a long, straight road devoid of pedestrians or vehicular traffic.

"Did either of you find Halfrida?" Accardo called out to them.

"Nein!" the Lovers answered in unison.

"Are you sure?" Hannelore chimed.

"Jawohl!" they replied.

Accardo and his Nightingales ran up to them. The group stopped in front of them, behind the Dewy-Princess, and they all took a few seconds to catch their breaths. "Where…is she?" Accardo panted, asking the Lovers again.

"She's nowhere to be found in the lower levels," Walther replied. He and his wife turned to the gates of the motor pool in front of the Dewy-Princess. "She must have escaped or else she's hiding in some place we haven't checked – the motor pool, for starters."

"I just hope she's not dead already," Isolde sobbed.

Walther shook his wife. "You must be positive, woman!" He shouted at her.

"Coming through, Lovers!" Joseph pumped his Remington 870 shotgun. He aimed at the padlock attached to a steel chain wrapped around the gate and fired a well-placed shot. The padlock shattered and fell off the chain. He and his beloved Jennifer walked up to the gate. Jennifer kicked the left side of the gate, Joseph kicked the right. Both sections of the gate swung open.

The *Dewy-Princess* advanced onward. Accardo and his fellow Nightingales, joined by the Lovers, raced toward the building's entrance and trailed after the *Dewy-Princess*. Past the blast doors, a concrete road led toward a huge, empty parking garage that spanned for over a mile. The massive doors of a service elevator opened, on the other side of the garage.

A gigantic MAFV rolled out of the elevator. Thirty two feet long, eight feet high, the monstrosity towered over any known MAFV at about the size of an American M1 Abrams Main Battle Tank. It featured a sloped chassis with four turrets. A large turret with twin cannons and a coaxial laser machine gun mounted up front; two smaller turrets sported quad-mounted laser guns on both sides; and one small turret in the rear with a stubby, fat, penis-shaped plasma FlaK cannon.

"So that's the Prototype MAFV Halfrida's been talking about?" Accardo asked the Lovers.

"I was about to ask you the same thing!" Walther yelled.

"Guess we're all clueless then!" Isolde screamed.

Drusilla radioed everyone over their two-way radios inside their satchels. "I think that MAFV is an experimental prototype from the Rosy War," she said.

"What the hell?" Hannelore muttered.

"She can't be for real!" Percival slapped his forehead with his hand.

Lance bellowed, "How the hell did they build that freaking monstrosity?!"

"How are we supposed to destroy that thing?" Joseph grumbled.

"I don't even want to know, Joe!" Jennifer told him.

Percival scoffed at the MAFV as it rolled towards everyone. "That thing isn't invincible! We can totally destroy that thing on our own!"

Accardo chimed, "Air support will turn that damn thing into scrap!"

The MAFV monstrosity's twin cannons fired. A salvo of plasma bolts zoomed towards the Nightingales and the Lovers. Everyone dodged them, the big bolts leaving even bigger holes on the concrete walls behind them.

Accardo and the other fled back outside. Drusilla's Maurice stayed behind. The Ryanite MAFV's turret fired round after round at the enemy's chassis. Each shot failed to penetrate the Prototype's hull.

The Maurice began moving backwards. The big, fat Goliath fired another salvo of ten bolts at the Maurice. All but one bolt managed to hit it. The fatal bolt melted through half of the Maurice's hull, vaporizing it. Drusilla and her crewmates, flying in a helicopter overhead, disconnected their headsets from the MAFV. Everything in front of the Maurice's rear engine was reduced to cinders, ash and melted steel.

The lumbering MAFV rolled past the destroyed Maurice, crushing it beneath its massive treads. Slow and sluggish, the sheer weight of its thick armored hull prevented it from catching up with the Nightingales and the Lovers.

Outside, Accardo and the Nightingales ran away from the motor pool's gates, fleeing from the onslaught of this monstrosity. No antitank weapon on hand appeared capable of puncturing the front armor. Returning to the intersection, the Nightingales and the Lovers traveled in different directions. They searched for buildings to hide from the Prototype MAFV.

The Nightingales left the vehicle to the Ryanite St. Gandolph A-Wings flying overhead. Ga205s and Ga210s hunted the Conspiracy's Prototype. The miniature Stukas dropped dive-bombed unguided ordnance over it. Several bombs missed. Ga210s strafed it with a combination of laser and plasma fire.

Small holes formed on the roof of the chassis. On the ground, the Prototype's side and rear turrets sprang to life. The cannons on all three turrets shot up and blanketed the sky with AA shells.

FlaK clouds and tracers appeared above Fort Redemption. A Ga205 exploded in midair. Another was hit with a FlaK shell as it detonated beneath its undercarriage. One Ga210 had its right wing ripped away from the fuselage. The damaged A-Wing crashed landed on the roof of the Quonset hut.

The Prototype prowled the grounds of Fort Redemption in search of the Nightingales. The Ryanite A-Wings kept coming. They continued to harass it, pummeling it with more bombs, more plasma bolts, more laser beams.

The Huey helicopter Drusilla and her crew were operating from came under fire. The Prototype MAFV's side turrets had its sights on the Huey. The pilot performed a zigzag to dodge the incoming attacks.

With the Prototype distracted, the Ryanite A-Wings prepared for another bombing run. One after another, the Ga210s strafed the vehicle from the front with rockets and cannon fire. Ga205s lunged toward it with another round of bombings. All of their attacks scored direct hits on the chassis.

One bomb destroyed the engine. One of the monstrosity's eight engines in the rear was set ablaze. One destroyed engine was enough to halt it in its tracks. Everything onboard the vehicle died down as the flames inside the hull spread to the electronics below the main turret.

Accardo and his Nightingales emerged from the nearby buildings with the Lovers in tow. They cheered at the vehicle as it exploded into a huge fireball, steel debris flying all over the place in a heap of smoke. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to them, Halfrida escaped hours before their raid on Fort Redemption.

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(*Six weeks later*)

Harold sat at his desk inside the State Chancellor's office, alone and bored. Slouching in the comfy leather swivel chair, he tapped the fingers on right hand on the desk as he waited for Halfrida to call him. The satphone rested on the desk beside his fingers.

The satphone rang. He swiped it from the desk and spoke into it. "Hello?"

Ulrich greeted him on the other line. "Cousin, it is I! I just got a call from Duchess Perpetua and the House of Raynerson at Imperial Palace."

"What is it?" Harold leaned forward, toward the edge of his seat. Impatience building and raging within, several drops of sweat rolled down his forehead.

"They're letting Chandler go," Ulrich said. "Your sister's boyfriend is now in our custody." Sounds of Blackhawk helicopter rotors in the background downed out his voice.

"Cousin, I can't hear you," Harold spoke. "Could you please speak up?"

"…We're getting in the Blackhawk now," Ulrich shouted. "Want me to give the phone to Chandler?"

"Sure," Harold answered.

On the other end was Chandler's voice. "Hello?"

"Chandler, this is the State Chancellor speaking," he told him.

"Yes sir," Chandler responded in a polite tone.

Your boyfriend sounds like a nice guy, Halfrida, Harold thought to himself. He spoke into the satphone. "I want you to meet my godfather and Commandant of Adelbu, Walther Schäffer at Castle Blackstone at 0600 tomorrow." He placed the satphone on his other ear. "High Command wants to promote you, Representative Accardo, and the rest of the Nightingales to my personal bodyguard division."

"Is there something else I need to do first?" Chandler voiced.

"Just answer the right questions tomorrow morning and you'll do fine." Harold leaned back in his chair and cracked a smile.

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(*One day later*)

Walther and Chandler sat at a table inside a briefing room. A digital recorder was laid on the table. "*Ich verstehe*," Walther said to him in his thick German accent, "But I digress…" He pushed the record button on the recorder and resumed Chandler's debriefing. "Intelligence Debriefing Nr…" He cleared his throat and enunciated. "…SECHS-NULL-ACHT-ZWEI-NULL-EINS-VIER (6082014) – Herr Martinsen's testimony."

He stared at the recorder. "RGA Nightingale Chandler Daniel Martinsen came to my attention, thanks to the Cousins of Harold and Halfrida Brotzman. For the past several months, my Frau and I have been probing the whereabouts of Halfrida. She went missing and was later reported at Fort Redemption, an Underground installation suspected to be under Conspiracy control."

"Herr Martinsen," Walther addressed Chandler, "Please share with us what you, Halfrida, and Representative Accardo have learned about the Ostara Conspiracy." He picked up a notepad and pen next to the recorder, taking notes as Chandler spoke.

Chandler recited a rehearsed script from Walther. "Contrary to what most believe, the Conspiracy certainly has an agenda in Brotzmanskrieg. The true nature of their objectives is discussed here on 'Intelligence Debriefing Nr. 6082014 – Herr Martinsen's Testimony.'"

"*Danke schön*, Herr Martinsen." Walther opened the notepad to a page full of handwritten notes and read them to Chandler. "The Conspiracy, based on my observations, appeared to be in collusion with the Underground and its allies. Their goal is simple: crush GACSS and usher the Fourth Reich in *Neudeutschland*." He made eye-contact with Chandler's eyes. "Is there credibility in any of that?"

"No sir," Chandler answered. "The Conspiracy has a separate agenda, independent of us and Underground. Underground intelligence reports, courtesy of Duchess Perpetua Raynerson, suggest that the Conspiracy is leeching off of the Underground like a parasite. We–Halfrida and I, that is–suspected…"

In a split-second, Walther stopped the tape. "*Was ist das*?" He voiced his confusion. "Am I to assume that the Conspiracy had cells embedded in both GACSS and Underground?"

"We found that to be the Underground's case, earlier in this novel," Chandler recalled. "In your novel, *Fame and Honor*, the Conspiracy was embedded in the RGA's Volksarmee and the 'Gray Knights'. The latter, those who can't bother connecting the dots, were the White Nationalists that Fake News alluded to in both this novel and the last one."

Walther banged his fist against the table and laughed. "*Natürlich*, if they did manage to make it this far…!" He banged the table again.

"*Korrekt*," Chandler chuckled. "Continue the tape, please." He pointed his finger at the digital recorder.

"*Jawohl*." Walther pushed the record button again. The debriefing continued.

"See, the Conspiracy acts on its own accord, independent of the Underground and GACSS," Chandler continued. "Lady Ostara and whoever is backing her has a terrorist cell operating inside every Great Power–GACSS, Underground, IDP, FYC, PNU, WC, CSI, and so forth."

Walther jotted down abridged statements from Chandler. "So Brotzmanskrieg was not the Conspiracy's doing?"

"Yes," Chandler said, "That only happens in German neo-Nazi novels, where Americans and Russians are too stupid to not launch nukes at each other."

"The Conspiracy," Walther noted, "For years, have made deals with the Dweller Mafia and played a role in backroom politics." He glared at Chandler. "Are there any specific examples of this?"

"There are plenty, but everything revolves around the pursuit of something."

"Care to elaborate?" Walther stopped writing.

Chandler paused. "It's true that Ostara had rediscovered an IG Farben pharmaceutical called *Droge Acht* – 'Drug Eight', or just 'D-VIII'. She learned that the main ingredient, contrary to modern science, is not an endangered species. Turns out, it's the cash crop of the Dweller people down here."

"Tree Caviar," Walther spoke, "If refined under the right conditions, can be synthesized to produce D-VIII. That's understandable." He glanced at his notes again. "Through political connections in the Independent Dweller Party, Ostara struck a deal with the Dweller Mob to produce the drug in controlled plantations throughout the Dweller World."

"You're correct," Chandler told him. "The Conspiracy allowed the Dweller mobsters connected to the Ludwig Crime Family to subsidize the drug trade for them. One method the wiseguys used were recovered U-Boats from the Dweller navies, which they used to smuggle the drugs around the globe. Another method was through the five Trading Houses of the Western Commonwealth. Large sums of money came as a result of these drug operations."

"There had to have been some benefit to this slush fund, *ja*?"

"Oh yes, there was." Chandler nodded. "Some of that money went to fund operations such as the recent March 21st Plot. My superior, Representative Accardo, told me that RGA General Sawyer, the late commander of the RGA's *Volksarmee*, received kickbacks from those drug sales."

"I assume he told you this while in captivity?" Walther jotted down 'he learned of this while as a POW' on the notepad.

Chandler nodded again. "Yes, thanks to the Underground's hostility toward the Conspiracy. Remember, we're not the only ones at war with the terrorists. Anyhow, the rest of the money, from what Halfrida and I could tell was being funneled toward continuing research projects that either Nazi Germany carried out during World War II or else by the Remnants during the Rosy War. All of that was done in secret at various Underground facilities such as Fort Redemption."

Walther flipped a page and resumed writing. "What sort of 'research' did you, Halfrida Brotzman, and Representative Accardo uncover?"

"I don't know, something about 'experimental superweapons and the Brotzman family's connections to 9/11,'" Chandler said. "Gauss weaponry, jetpacks, force fields, concealable micro-bombs are at the top of the list. One project, however, remained elusive: FORESIGHT."

"FORESIGHT dealt with a research project that delved into a bizarre Luftgeschwaders or A-Wing called a 'Magic Eye'. The Magic Eye was a disc-shaped object capable of performing speeds and maneuvers far beyond any A-Wing has ever achieved."

"Let's talk about 9/11, shall we?"

"What about it, Commandant Schäffer?"

"There had been a lot of circumstantial evidence piling up over the course of our investigation into the Conspiracy, evidence that the Brotzman family had anything to do with 9/11."

Chandler's eyes narrowed.

"The Brotzman family were said to have bankrolled Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda through François Genoud, the Swiss-French banker who euthanized himself back in 1996. But it seems like they cooked the books." Walther glazed over his notes. "Authorities are still investigating their financial activities from during the Third Reich years," he whistled. "Makes you wonder if Genoud's suicide was to evade justice and not a 'suicide' – a murder resembling a suicide."

"I know," Chandler told him. "Even so, we're still finding more evidence of the Conspiracy dabbling in counterfeiting, all sorts of fraud, computer software

and antiquities theft. That 9/11 evidence suggested something entirely different from that of terrorism."

"I never thought the Conspiracy were that sophisticated," Walther voiced. "And here I was, thinking these illicit activities were funding the IDA at best."

"Some things aren't what they seem, Commandant Schäffer," Chandler said. "Lady Ostara's actions, while unpredictable and insane, can't belong to that of herself. Somebody else has to be guiding her activities."

"And who do you suspect?"

"No idea. The answer may be related to whatever Halfrida's doing."

Walther stopped the recorder. He set the pen and notepad down on the table, its pages littered with handwritten notes. "Shall we discuss the other matter?"

"Will this be brought to the State Chancellor's attention?"

Walther nodded.

"Then let's begin." Chandler straightened his posture.

"As of yesterday, the RGA has launched Case Red–the liberation of the Dweller World," Walther told him. "The Coalition, a Catholic-friendly Dweller regime, has already been established at Underworld. Through our guidance, the Coalition will bring peace and prosperity to all Dwellers within its borders."

"As for Lady Ostara and her Conspiracy?"

"They're pulling up stakes, their whereabouts unknown to us."

"Do we have any leads?"

"So far, there are none. It's like they disappeared without a trace." Walther reached into his pocket and placed a photograph of a boy on the table. He slid it toward Chandler's side. "An intelligence report from your friend, Marcus McAlister, brought this to our attention. According to him, there is all but one person who hasn't gone scarce yet."

Chandler picked up the photo off the table. The face looked familiar to him. It was a photograph of Virgil Sapienti in his IDA uniform. "You mean this guy?"

"*Jawohl*," answered Walther. "We know this because he was hired a few years back by Lady Ostara."

"What about Representative Accardo and his Nightingales?"

"They, along with you, will be part of the Adelburgers at State Chancellor's request. Today, you all are now under the command of 1st Adelbu Panzer Division–*Leibgarde Harold Brotzman*, 'Lifeguards of Harold Brotzman.'"

"That's awesome." Chandler smiled. "I've always wanted to be one of the State Chancellor's most trusted bodyguards. Could this be a reward for my efforts these past two years?"

"*Korrekt*," said Walther. "In addition, the Leibgarde will be sent to frontlines of the Dweller World." He got up and held out his hand to Chandler. "Welcome aboard, Kamerad."

"*Danke schön*." Shaking his hand, Chandler thanked him.

Chapter Twenty Eight: Burning Bridges
(Ryanite Chorus; June 23rd-30th, 2014)

"Case Red, it's more like Stalingrad 2.0!"

-Harold Brotzman

And that's basically what happened on that recent shopping trip," Isolde told her husband and the boys. Her arms were clutched onto a StG44 assault rifle, the barrel pointing upward at the ceiling of a fluorescent-lit tunnel in the Dweller World. "Shopping malls are...strange to me. *Ja*, Europe has them, but they're still an American concept." Her comments were met with silence.

She sat on the bench of a Hanomag *Sd.Kfz. 251* halftrack beside her husband, Walther, Republic Representative Margaret Diana Richardson and State Chancellor Harold Brotzman. In front of the four sat Chandler, Hannelore and Lance. All seven were dressed in standard-issue Fackelträger (*Torchbearer*) suits and wielded either a G43 semi-auto rifle or an StG44 assault rifle.

From the front, the Hanomag was hexagonal-shaped. It sported four swivel-mounted MG34 machine guns that covered the vehicle's flanks. The halftrack traveled west as part of a convoy of Adelbu Opel Blitz trucks and other Hanomags. With Case Red underway, 1st Adelbu Panzer Division was already living up to its status as the State Chancellor's Leibgarde–his 'Life Guards'.

"Funny how Drusilla isn't here with us," Harold chuckled.

Hannelore laughed, her hand wrapped over her forehead as she shook her head. "As if we want to hear you brag about how nice you look in lacey lingerie!"

The other girls laughed. Harold flustered in embarrassment. "Hannelore, I thought we agreed that topic would be off-limits!"

Margaret pondered, "Where is that girl, anyway?"

Chandler pointed at the Opel behind them. "With her crew inside the back of that truck," he said. "After all, MAFV crews can be deployed close to the battlefield if needed, but it's not required."

"Tell me about it," Lance commented. He hollered at the driver. "Hey, we just passed La Mesa. How much longer before we reach Mothers Den?"

"Be there in a few dozen clicks," the driver yelled back.

Walther awakened from his nap. "Where are we now?" he yawned.

"Not far from 'Carthage', a Dweller town east of Mothers Den," Chandler replied. "Its caverns are situated on a crossroads, the roads leading to Mothers Den and other cities along Rebirth Waters' eastern coast."

"And the road we need to take crosses a bridge over a bottomless chasm of flowing water," Isolde added.

"Is the water even going somewhere?" Lance wondered.

"As far as intelligence is concerned, the water flows into the Waters of Rebirth," Isolde noted.

"Now that think about it," Margaret mentioned, "I've never been there."

"It's not that impressive," Hannelore told her. "Bluebloods on the western coast trade with their Mole equivalents on the other side."

"That reminds me…" Harold paused. "A geologist claimed that Earth's interior contains more water down here than on the surface. Could the Great Flood in the Book of Genesis originate from the Dweller World?"

"*Erstaunlich*," Walther responded with intrigue. Isolde nodded.

"It's possible," Margaret retorted.

"Who knows?" Lance added.

"Sounds kind of far-fetched," said Chandler.

Hannelore chuckled. "A pipe dream, if you ask me, Harold."

"Then again," Harold continued, "The Eastern Hares, the Dweller religion, claim 'The Waters' came from either the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean."

Walther added. "Regardless, securing the bridge in Carthage is critical."

"What makes it so special?" asked Chandler.

"A bridge to Mothers Den would allow troops and MAFVs to take the city," Walther explained. "The IDA and their Underground backers don't want that to happen. That's why they've been destroying bridges as they retreated west."

Margaret gasped. "Are they're planning to blow up the bridge, Walther?"

"Burning bridges comes with playing scorched earth," Walther replied. "Lucky for us, the enemy's main force has retreated to Mothers Den. All that's left are teams of IDA sappers and a sniper buying them time."

Chandler growled, "The Silent Orphan, Virgil Sapienti?" His eyes squinted.

Walther nodded. He turned to the State Chancellor. "Harold, I need you to stay with Drusilla. Protect the trucks or else we're all sitting ducks, got it?"

Harold nodded. "Then I want you to lead the way, Walther."

"*Naturlich*," he answered.

"And while we're at it," Hannelore added, "Any bombs on the bridge will need to be defused. Does anyone here have experience with explosives?"

"Leave that to me," volunteered Isolde.

"Sounds like a plan," muttered Lance.

The driver declared, "We're almost at Carthage. Less than a minute."

The convoy emerged from the tunnel and navigated a road that went downhill. Up ahead was a cavern five miles wide, divided in half by a chasm. A large bridge connected the two halves. The Adelbu convoy, arriving at the outskirts, rolled through open gates and into Carthage proper.

Past the gates, no locals greeted them the would-be liberators or conquerors. No landmines, both antipersonnel and antitank, planted on the roads. No enemy soldiers shooting from streets, alleys, or the windows and rooftops of various buildings. No machine gun nests, antitank guns, or MAFVs lying in wait.

A dreary silence instead welcomed the State Chancellor and his Leibgarde. Along the main road, entire buildings were reduced to rubble by the enemy. Wrecked cars and debris from collapsed buildings blocked a few side roads. Others were cordoned off by barbed wire and concrete dragon's teeth barriers.

The obstacles forced the convoy to take a scenic route to the town square. The leading Hanomag steered left at an entrance and searched for any accessible roads into town.

Walther pointed at the buildings all around him and the others. "This sniper is everywhere and nowhere," he warned them. "Watch the buildings; he might try to pin us down."

"And stay away off the machine guns," Chandler added. "They only cover a limited field of fire."

Scanning his surroundings, Harold cocked his G43 and turned his torso around. His finger on the trigger, he aimed at the rooftops and the windows of multi-story buildings up ahead. "Nothing on my end." He tilted his head. "How about you, Margaret?"

"I got nothing," Margaret answered. With her hand wrapped around the grip of her G43, she patted Isolde's shoulder. "See anything?"

"*Kein Feind Aktivität*," she reported. "*Mein Walther seht nichts*."

Chandler, Hannelore and Lance focused on the halftrack's right flank.

"Creepy," Hannelore commented. "Are all snipers like this?"

"Not all of them are," Chandler said. "Some are real perverts."

"I'd hate to meet this guy up close," chimed Lance.

Uneasiness flared as the convoy prowled deeper into the town.

Fresh air breezed from air vents on the rocky, cavernous walls. The Hanomag halted in the middle of an intersection. The traffic lights were disabled, as the IDA began sabotaging the local power supply. Town square was less than a mile away. "No need to stop," Harold told the driver. "It's not like anyone's here."

A loud gunshot rang out. A bullet struck Lance's shoulder, grazing it before ricocheting and disintegrating on the Hanomag's armor. Lance screamed in pain.

Walther shouted, "*Scharfschütze*, *Scharfschütze*!"

"Driver," Harold yelled, "Stop the halftrack!"

The driver slammed the brakes, bringing the Hanomag to a complete halt. The sniper fired potshots at the halftrack's armor. "Deploying smoke," the driver declared. Smoke canisters were released from the Hanomag, blanketing the area around it in a thick white cloud. The driver shifted the gearshift in reverse, backing up into the exposed side of a nearby building to stay out of the sniper's crosshairs.

Chandler examined Lance's wound. "It's just a flesh wound," Chandler shouted, "The bullet went right through! You're going to be fine!" He reached for a hypodermic needle from a pouch on his field webbing, and injected a shot of codeine into Lance's arm. "Feel better?"

Lance nodded. Chandler helped him get back up. Harold disembarked the halftrack, seeking cover in a nearby alley. Chandler and the others followed him. They took a moment to catch their breath. In the alley, Walther gave Hannelore a first aid kit from his satchel. Hannelore tended Lance's wound.

"Where the hell is that sniper?" Margaret asked. Her back was against a wall.

Isolde retorted, "His position is somewhere to the west."

"How do you'd know that?"

She pointed at Lance's wound. "Based on the angle of where Lance was hit."

"That's not important, you two," Walther told the girls. "We need to find a way to get past that sniper. If we don't hurry, the IDA sappers will be finished planting the explosives."

Chandler paused. "Then we should take the alley and cross an avenue that'll take us to town square," he suggested.

"Where will that take us?" Hannelore asked whilst bandaging Lance's wound.

"South of the town square," Chandler retorted

"Even so, we'll still be in the sniper's sights," shuddered Margaret.

"Then let's make our moves unpredictable," Walther responded.

Harold made the sign of the cross. "Alright, everyone, hand over your smoke grenades. We're going to be popping smoke soon."

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Hundreds of yards away, in the bell tower above the town square, Virgil Sapienti kneeled behind a small window. Exhaling, he regulated his breathing while staring down the scope of a Soviet Dragenov sniper rifle. The smoke filling the street had yet to dissipate. "Target's still alive," Virgil swore to himself. He adjusted the scope's magnification.

The smoke dissipated, revealing the disappearance of the halftrack and its passengers. None of the targets appeared at any of the adjacent alleyways to the town square. "Playing cat and mouse, are we?" Virgil swapped magazines. "Fine, two can play at that game." Standing up, he abandoned his position.

Relocating to the floor below his last, Virgil kneeled before an opened window. He inhaled and aimed at the lights in the cavern ceiling above the town. "Try finding me in the dark, Ryanite wastrels," he taunted.

Fast and swift, Virgil's emptied his magazine on the lights. One by one, the cavern lights over Carthage was extinguished. Darkness shrouded entire neighborhoods in Carthage. From the table behind him, he grabbed a pair of night vision goggles. With them, he continued searching for the Ryanites.

South of town square, Harold and his cronies jogged through a long alleyway. They navigated the darkness with night vision goggles. Taking point, Harold crouched beside the corner of a wall. He gestured the others to rally behind him. "Stop," he whispered to them, "Let me peek around the corner."

Poking his head around the corner, Harold briefly studied the southern and northern avenues to town square. In the meantime, the others chitchatted with one another. "Is that sniper still onto us?" Lance wondered.

Chandler answered, "It's safe to assume that he still is, Lance."

"Then I doubt we're going to make it to the bridge," Hannelore voiced.

"Not sure why," Margaret muttered, "But I can hear engines rumbling."

"I hear it, too," Harold commented. "Are those Ingrids?"

"They're probably one of ours," Chandler mentioned.

After surveying the town square, Harold reported back to the others. "As I expected," he stated, "The avenues are mined. Both of the streets are littered with Teller antitank mines."

Walther, standing behind Harold, commended him for his observation. "Perhaps your decision to go with us was sound after all," he commented. "This means that Drusilla and the other MAFVs are incapable of helping us. Plus, the sniper and our lack of AT weapons worsen the situation."

"True, but a main road behind the southern avenue leads to somewhere west," Harold recalled. "Drusilla and her MAFVs are still in the position to assist."

Without warning, Walther felt his wife patting him on his shoulder. "What is it, Isolde?" He turned his head and faced her.

"See that alleyway on the other side of the street?" Isolde pointed. "I wonder where it leads."

"You're thinking of throwing a smoke grenade across the street?" Walther guessed at his wife's intentions.

Isolde nodded. "It's worth a try." She reached into a satchel and prepared to toss a smoke grenade at the street.

Margaret stopped her. "Wait, before you do that," she advised, "Let's coordinate a diversion with Representative Accardo first." As the one carrying the field radio, Margaret tried to radio Accardo. "Action Andy," she spoke into the telephone, "This is Margaret, callsign 'Godmother'. Please respond, over."

A response from Accardo came. "This is Action Andy," he declared. "We're in position near the northern avenue. Awaiting further orders, over."

"Excellent," Margaret cheered, "We need you and some of your Adelbu Nightingales to distract the sniper for us. Get his attention away from the southern avenue."

"We'll do what we can, Action Andy out," Accardo responded.

Margaret switched frequencies and contacted Drusilla. "Dewy-Princess, I need you to deploy your Ingrid. Once you're ready to roll take the main road south of town square."

"Roger that," Drusilla retorted, "Dewy-Princess out."

"Godmother out," Margaret put the telephone aside and signaled Isolde to throw the smoke grenade.

Isolde tossed the grenade at the street. As the grenade generated smoke, Harold and his cronies crossed the street. They went to the alley and proceeded west, navigating through tight, winding streets and open parking spaces.

Back in the bell tower, Virgil stared at the southern avenue. He was alerted by the sudden appearance of smoke there. In an instant, the window behind him shattered. Startled, he leaped to the other window and spotted three Ryanites approaching from the north. They zigzagged from building to building in an attempt to avoid his shots. Wielding the Dragenov, Virgil aimed his rifle at them.

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Three gunshots from a sniper rifle echoed once Harold and his cronies hid behind a stone wall. Their position, situated behind a small apartment building, overlooked a two lane street. Beyond it was a sidewalk with benches and steel handrails. The bridge itself stood between the two segments of handrails.

Two Ingrid 142s, painted in IDA colors, guarded eastern side of the bridge. Both were supported by an idle platoon of IDA grunts. Further up the bridge were three trucks carrying crates of explosive ordnance. Six sappers took turns between hauling the explosives out of the trucks and planting them. In the tunnel beyond the bridge, no other enemies were seen.

"It's nice that they don't know we're here," Chandler mentioned. "This should be a cakewalk for us."

"Assuming Drusilla shows up and dispatches the two Ingrids," Walther said.

"Speaking of which," asked Harold, "Where is she?"

Margaret's radio crackled with noise. She answered it and heard Drusilla's voice on the other end. "What's your current position?"

"I'm on the southern roadway leading to the bridge," Drusilla reported. "I have a clear view of two Ingrids dead ahead. Want me to take a shot?"

"Sure," Margaret answered, "We'll open up on the infantry once you draw the first shot."

"Affirmative," said Drusilla, "Dewy-Princess out."

Within seconds, a plasma bolt penetrated the right side of an IDA Ingrid. The shot destroyed the transmission, disabling it. The other Ingrid sprang into action, and the supporting infantry followed.

"Open fire," Harold ordered. He and the others emerged from cover and unloaded on the unsuspecting enemy.

From her position, Drusilla launched a TOW rocket at the enemy Ingrid. Guided by a small steel cable, the rocket flew to the target in midair. It swerved downward and detonated itself on the Ingrid's turret, destroying the MAFV. "Scratch another enemy armor," she declared.

Without armored support, the IDA infantry were cut down by the seven. After eliminating the platoon, Harold gestured the others to follow him to the bridge. In a daunting rush, they stormed the bridge and dispatched the sappers there. Drusilla's Ingrid joined them once they secured the trucks and explosives.

Safe from enemy action, Isolde proceeded to search and defuse any active bombs. At the trucks, the other six were rejoined by Drusilla's Ingrid. "Margaret," Harold said to her, "Tell the others that the bridge is now ours."

"I'm on it," Margaret replied, radioing Accardo and the other Adelburgers.

North of the bridge, Virgil emerged from an alley with the Dragenov in his hands. With the Adelburgers after him, he ditched his rifle and sprinted toward the handrail. He climbed over it and stared at the watery abyss below.

Virgil sighed to himself, upon seeing the seven's handiwork. "It seems I have a date with destiny at Mothers Den." He jumped off the cliff and plummeted half a mile down. Crashing head first into the water, Virgil disappeared among the crashing waves that flowed southwest of Carthage.

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(*One week later*)

Nineteen terrorists posing as IDA commandos hopped onto several jeeps and departed from a harbor of moored troopships. Traveling through friendly

lines at high speed, they entered a long, winding tunnel until it brought them to the western outskirts of Mothers Den. Virgil Sapienti, riding shotgun in the first jeep, gestured the driver to stop.

The drivers parked their jeeps at a diner, now repurposed into an IDA forward headquarters. While the others exited the vehicles, Virgil retrieved a two-way radio and contacted his commanding officer, Colonel Vincent Ludwig Jr., a fellow conspirator and the son of Dweller Prime Minister Vincent Ludwig Sr.

"We've reached Mothers Den," Virgil announced. "Have there been any changes to the target's condition?"

"RGA intelligence indicates that Halfrida Brotzman is still holed up at the Blue House Hotel," Colonel Ludwig Jr. informed Virgil. "Our ground troops are fighting RGA and Adelbu Panzergrenadiers for control of the premises. The Ryanites have MAFVs and halftracks, so be prepared to engage them."

"Affirmative," Virgil said, "Silent Orphan out." Putting the radio away, he and the other terrorists abandoned their vehicles. They jogged deeper into the besieged city of Mothers Den on foot and navigated through its intricate sewer lines and alleys, avoiding all possible contact with RGA forces.

Upon traveling down an alley, the commandos arrived at an empty courtyard. As they jogged toward another alley, Virgil's radio crackled. "Be advised, Silent Orphan," Colonel Ludwig Jr. said over the radio. "Friendly forces have confirmed an RGA Heavy MAFV, designated 'St. Hannibal I', roaming near your AO."

Virgil stopped in the middle of the other alley. The others followed suit. "What do we know about the St. Hannibal?" he inquired.

"Designed by their Remnants ally, the Hannibal resembles a Tiger tank," the CO reported. "It boasts one big intimidating plasma cannon capable of destroying Underground Marcellas at long range. Nobody's been able to destroy one yet."

"Thanks for the heads up," Virgil said. As a precaution, he switched the radio's frequency to ones used by RGA MAFVs.

Upon emerging from the alley, the commandos entered a T-junction. Under heavy enemy fire, the commandos rushed to the center of the intersection. Behind a barricade of sandbags, they helped a battered squad of IDA grunts fend off an RGA assault from all directions.

Armed with a stolen Russian AN94 assault rifle, Virgil squeezed multiple bursts of rounds at the Ryanites. To his dismay, each fusillade ricocheted against the enemy's body armor. His assailants wore modified Fackelträger Mk. II suits incorporating black double-breasted overcoats, matching gasmasks and glowing-white Sam Browne belts with ammo pouches.

Just as the Ryanites were about to overrun him and his fellow terrorists, an unexpected savior appeared. From the southern approach, three IDA-patterned Marcellas raced to the infantry's aid. Their sudden appearance, together with superior plasma and laser weaponry, forced the surviving Ryanites to retreat.

As the enemy retreated down the eastern roadway, the Marcellas gave chase. Virgil stood behind the sandbags, giving thanks to the Pious Mother from the depths of his thoughts. *Thank you, Pious Mother, for ensuring our survival.*

"Had you guys not shown up on time, I would have been a goner," a grateful IDA soldier thanked Virgil.

"You're welcome," smirked Virgil. "It's all part of me and my men's job. Are you going to be fine, alone?"

The IDA soldier shook his head. "With the rest of my platoon annihilated, I'm planning on radioing for replacements. Don't worry; I'll stay here and continue holding this position."

"Then I wish you well on all your endeavors," Virgil said to him.

"Likewise," the soldier retorted.

Virgil rallied around his terror cell. "Move your butts, men, we're heading out to the Blue House Hotel." The terrorists abandoned their positions and proceeded down the same road that the Marcellas went. The eastern road converged on a four-lane road that led the commandos to the Tourist District.

Further down the road, the terrorists spotted the three Marcellas from earlier. Accompanied by infantry, the Marcellas engaged in a firefight with Ryanite Panzergrenadiers. As the firefight ensued, Virgil and the others rushed inside small apartment behind the IDA troops. From various windows and exposed walls, the commandos exchanged potshots with the Ryanites.

Meanwhile on the roof, Virgil discovered a dead IDA soldier. Next to the body lay an RPK light machine gun and several drum magazines. Taking the weapon off the ground, Virgil redeployed the RPK on a concrete barrier. With the Panzergrenadiers in his sights, he opened fire, slaying several in seconds.

In the building on Virgil's left, a lone RGA Panzergrenadier appeared on the rooftop. Wielding a Panzerfaust, he fired at one of the Marcellas. The projectile managed to land a direct on a Marcella's engine. Immediately, the MAFV caught on fire before exploding into a fireball.

Ditching the RPK, Virgil grabbed his AN-94 and fired several rounds at the Panzergrenadier on the roof. He watched the wounded Ryanite's body slump over the roof and fall to the street below. Upon dispatching him, Virgil noticed the IDA Marcellas and troops driving toward the Blue House Hotel. With the Panzergrenadiers eliminated, Virgil exited the rooftop and regrouped with his team outside the building.

At the Blue House, IDA defenders had successfully repelled another assault by the RGA. They taunted and jeered at the retreating Ryanite soldiers and MAFVs. The two Marcellas parked next to a machine gun crew, positioned at the front entrance. The machine gunners, hungry and exhausted, took a brief respite.

IDA trucks bearing white crosses on their canvas arrived with medics, supplies and stretchers. The medics carried their medical supplies inside the building, evacuating both the wounded and dead. During the ongoing commotion, Virgil ran up to the machine gunners. "Who's in command here?"

"Colonel Ludwig Jr.," a gunner informed him, pointing at the entrance. "You'll find him at the main hotel lobby."

The terrorists and a few IDA troops entered the bombed-out hotel. Inside the spacious lobby, they found Colonel Ludwig Jr. sitting on a couch. He had a

Remington 870 shotgun on his lap and a bloody bandage around his forehead. The officer got up and raised his right arm over his shoulder. "Heil Hitler."

"Heil Hitler," Virgil said in an impolite voice, chuckling. "I see you're still in control of the IDA's 'Sentinels of Dawn Brigade.'"

"Damn right," the Colonel admitted. "What can I do for you?"

Virgil addressed the purpose of his visit. "My men and I have orders from Ostara to capture Halfrida Brotzman. She escaped Fort Redemption before it was raided and we now know she's from inside this hotel." He pointed at the floor. "Has she evacuate the city yet?"

"No." Colonel Ludwig Jr. shook his head.

"Which room is she hiding?" pondered Virgil.

"Room 845," recalled the Colonel.

"Good," Virgil said in delight, "I hope she's still alive. Are the elevators no longer functional?"

"You're better off taking the stairs down this groundscraper." He gestured at a blown wall exposing a short hallway full of dead Adelburgers, an opened door to a stairwell on the other end. "It's a long way down, but it's all we got."

"Thanks." Virgil blew a whistle and rallied his terror cell again.

After thanking the Colonel, the commandos trudged through a nearby hallway and toward the doorway on the other end. Virgil and the others dashed nine flights of stairs down before reaching the eighth floor. They stormed a small, art-deco corridor, passing an elevator lobby with four old-fashion elevators.

An awkward silence pervaded the halls of the eighth floor. Ceiling lights flickered and shuttered before fading out. Mothers Den's electrical infrastructure had sustained severe damage because of the battle raging upstairs. In each hallway, the doors were left opened by their guests as they frantically fled the city.

Virgil stood by the closed doorway and noted the numbers on the plaque next to it. "824…this is the place…" He kicked the door down.

The commandos rushed into the room, guns drawn. Virgil followed after them, entering a spacious living room inside a presidential suite.

Halfrida Brotzman appeared from a dining room in another hallway. She pointed her Cz75 Tactical Sports at Virgil. The other terrorists pointed their guns at her in response. "Put down your gun," one of the commandos shouted in German. "You hear me? Drop it!"

She wrapped her finger around the trigger and cocked the gun, exchanging exchanged brief stares with Virgil. Yet the handgun in Virgil's stoked her curiosity. "A Welrod: the pistol of choice for assassins, resistance fighters, and terrorists. I figured you had to be one of the three."

"Let's just say I'm all of the above." Virgil squeezed the trigger. A tranquilizer dart struck Halfrida's chest. It dart injected a sedative into her bloodstream.

Halfrida fired back. A loud gunshot rang out throughout the entire suite. The bullet stuck Virgil's abdomen. She dropped her Cz75 Tactical Sports. Her body dropped face first on the floor and went going into a comatose-like state.

Dropping to his knees, Virgil pressed his other hand against the bleeding wound. He growled in pain. The bullet was lodged inside his stomach. "The hell are you waiting for?" Virgil barked at the other terrorists. "Restrain her!"

Two of them plodded toward Halfrida's unconscious body. They confiscated her handgun and tied her hands with a sturdy plastic band. "Double knot it," one of them told the other.

Virgil got back on his feet. "Let's get out of here. The boat's waiting for us."

Part Four: Zur Hölle Und Zurück

(To Hell And Back)

Chapter Twenty Nine: The Battle Of Mothers Den (Ryanite Chorus; June 30th-July 2nd, 2014)

"Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult."

-Carl von Clausewitz, On War

Forward elements from the 4th RGA Panzer and the 1st Adelbu Panzer Divisions reached Mothers Den on June 30th. Veteran platoons of Maurices II/Gs coordinated a breakthrough at three gates on three different "floors". The city's three sprawling caverns and their numerous districts were sandwiched on top of each other, like the floors on a skyscraper.

Supported by *Panzergrenadiers*, the Maurices overwhelmed the defenders, forcing survivors into the city. Within minutes, the Ryanites entered the streets of the groundscraper city. Convoys of Hanomag halftracks, Opel trucks and Technical gun trucks followed.

Most of the city was already in ruins after days of carpet bombing by St. Blaise Bl303 A-Wings. Ryanite MAFVs combed cratered streets, supporting the *Panzergrenadiers* in house-to-house combat. Entrenched Underground and IDA troops garrisoned the ruins, turning them into fortified death traps. St. Gandolph Ga205 dive bombers circled overhead, dropping bombs with disorienting sirens. St. Francis Fr101J fighters soared alongside the miniature Stukas to protect them from hostile St. Faustina Fa-38As.

In an apartment bedroom on the second floor of a multistory building, Chandler almost tripped over an Underground soldier's corpse. He slammed his back on the remains of a wall. A section of it on his left had a large hole that overlooked an avenue in front of the building. With his StG44 slung over his shoulder, he tried to catch his breath. "Jen, Percival," he called out, "Hurry up!"

The siblings rushed into the room with an MG42, its tripod and metal ammo boxes of 7.92mm Mauser rounds. Percival settled the tripod on the ground behind the exposed hole. He and his sister worked to assemble the machine gun. A stray bullet whizzed between the siblings. They continued.

A loaded H&K MSG90, a militarized PSG1 rifle, was left below a windowsill on Chandler's right. The gun belonged to Walther Schäffer. He left it for Chandler, after he, Isolde and the others had flushed the building of Underground troops. The two-way radio buried in Chandler's satchel crackled with the voice of Harold. "Fair Knight, do you read me?"

Chandler picked up his radio. "You're coming to me five-by-five, Wise Man."

"We've made it to the Tourist District," Harold informed him. "Your current position overlooks the District from a less than a mile away."

"Renate's supposed to be at Blue House Hotel?" Chandler peeked around the windowsill. He spotted a two-story building bearing the name.

"Yes, Room 824. To be exact, since we're at the bottom of the city, it's eight stories beneath our feet."

"Guess that explains the structure's height." Chandler tossed his StG44 aside.

Harold added, "As for you and Godmother's siblings staying behind that apartment building, think you can do me a favor?"

"Anything for GACSS and your family," Chandler replied. "What's up?"

"The others and I are further up the main street, and the enemy's preparing to push us back. We need someone to cover us as we close in on the Blue House from the east. I can see IDAs garrisoned inside the lobby, and Action Andy just radioed that the rest of the *Leibgarde* is approaching from the north."

"Do you want me to rejoin you and the others?"

"You're fine where you are. Just keep us alive with that rifle Sleipnir left for you. Godmother's siblings will assist you, if necessary. Wise Man out."

Chandler put his radio away. He made the sign of the cross and prayed in silence. "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, lead all souls to Heaven, especially those most in need of Thy mercy. Amen."

Two hundred yards away, in the middle of a four lane roadway, Harold and his friends were positioned behind a barricade of rubble and sandbags. He scanned the surrounding areas ahead with binoculars. Margaret, the Lovers, Lance, and Hannelore were crouched beside him.

The buildings on their right flank had been reduced to a sorry-ass pile of bricks, revealing a small courtyard at the center. Two gateless entrances connected the courtyard to two different roads, one of them being the avenue in front of Chandler's position. The other road was a boulevard that stretched along the road in front of Harold and his friends.

In the distance, they overheard the chanting of IDA conscripts. Some officer was getting them all riled up. "Death to the Ryanite invader!" the officer yelled.

"Death to the Ryanite invader!" the conscripts responded in unison.

"*Verdammt, das ist sehr langweilig*," Isolde complained.

"You said it," chimed Hannelore.

Lance put his rifle down and turned to Isolde. "Talking to us or them?"

Isolde ignored him. Walther yawned.

Harold muttered, "What is this, the Battle of Stalingrad?"

"Wait, we're cosplaying that scene in *Enemy at the Gates*?" Lance pondered.

"*Nein*, that movie was terrible." Walther shook his head.

"Close," Harold told Lance. "I was thinking *Stalingrad: Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever?*, with the Soviets being encircled instead of the Germans."

"Oh hey, another German war film I've never heard of!" Lance chuckled.

Margaret's hands shook uncontrollably, her teeth gnawing at each other. The hellish landscape, the constant crescendo of gunfire, artillery fire, aerial bombings, and dying moans frightened her. "I can't take this anymore!" With both hands, she pulled the black Stahlhelm off her head, tossed it aside and proceeded to run.

In a swift motion, Lance and Hannelore latched onto Margaret's arms and prevented her from escaping. "Let me go, let me go!" Margaret shouted, struggling to break free from their tight clutches. "I just want to be someplace else!"

Her persistence forced the two to tighten their grips. "I'm sorry, Margaret, but we can't let you," Lance told her.

"Snap out of it, girl," Hannelore pleaded.

The girl with glasses refused to listen. A frustrated Walther stood up and slapped her cheek. "*Nein*, you will stay here and fight alongside us!" he shouted.

"Are you crazy?" she yelled back. "We're all going to die!"

"Calm yourself, Margaret," Harold spoke to her. "We came all this way to rescue my sister after everything that has happened since the Rebirth! Have faith in our group, just as I have for GACSS!"

"And we wouldn't be here if Halfrida decided not to hide out here," Walther screamed, slapping Margaret's cheek again.

Margaret moped in pain. Tears poured from her eyes as she wept.

"*Es tut mir leid*," he apologized. "Nothing will happen to us if we stick together." Walther handed her his PPsh41 and a satchel of drum magazines in exchange for her G43 rifle and ammo. "Do us all a favor and kill a couple Dwellers with that gun. It's the least you can do, ja?"

"O-okay…Walther, I-I'll…p-pull it together." Margaret ditched the empty drum magazine on the PPsh41, replacing it with a fresh one. The gun now loaded, Margaret began pacing back and forth behind the others.

Hannelore shook her head. "I swear, Lance," she whispered into his ear, "God broke the mold when He made that girl."

"Tell me about it," he whispered back.

From the enemy lines, someone blew a whistle. Hundreds poured into the streets and began to charge toward Harold and his friends. Bayonets fixed on the barrels of their rifles, triggered pulled.

"Here they come!" Harold shouted. He opened fire at the incoming IDA soldiers, the Lovers, Lance, Hannelore and Margaret fighting alongside him.

Downrange, a few IDAs separated from the pack by veering left into an alleyway. Running down the alley, they emerged at the boulevard in front of the courtyard. They rushed into the courtyard and proceeded to flank Harold and the others on their right.

Meanwhile, from the bedroom inside the multistory apartment complex, Percival and Jennifer unloaded the MG42 at the IDAs in the courtyard. The MG42 roared, the chamber ejecting hundreds of Mauser shell casings. The casings made a high pitch ensemble as they hit the floor.

Positioned at the window beside the two siblings, Chandler looked into the MSG90's scope with his other eye closed. An IDA with a flamethrower entered his crosshairs. A bullet hit the fuel tank strapped to his back, leaking gasoline on the street as the wielder ran. Another bullet pierced his helmet. He dropped to his knees. Chandler finished him with two more bullets to the head.

Across the boulevard, an IDA sniper ran up to a barrier on the roof of an adjacent building. Armed with a Dragunov, he fired several rounds at Harold's position. Chandler moved the scope's reticule to the sniper and turned the knob on the scope to get a closer look of his face.

The enemy sniper was Virgil Sapienti, the Silent Orphan. Chandler sent some bullets his way. Virgil ducked and proceeded to exit the roof.

"Where are you heading?" Chandler whispered to himself. "Come out, so I can finish you." He caught him running from window to window on the floors below the roof. "There you are." He fired a few rounds at him.

Virgil sprinted, evading Chandler's shots. The bullets ended up hitting some windows. Glass shattered. Chandler continued hunting the enemy sniper. Before long, his eye caught a shiny glare.

Three floors down, the IDA sniper repositioned inside a room with its windows opened. In a crouched stance, he was lining up a clean shot at Chandler. The enemy sniper's muzzle flashed. A bullet zoomed toward his position.

Chandler leaped away from the window. The bullet missed and instead ricocheted on the wall in the other side of the apartment bedroom. Chandler got back to his feet and returned to the window. He squeezed several bullets at the sniper, eliminating him.

From the road behind Harold and his friends, the Leibgarde's MAFVs, halftracks and gun trucks arrived with hundreds of Adelburgers. Their combined firepower helped them repel the IDA assault. They advanced past Harold and the others to the enemy's lines.

Harold fired a flare gun at the cavern ceiling. "On your feet," he shouted at his friends over loud gunfire, "We're moving on to the Blue House."

***

Harold barged into a door to the Blue House Hotel presidential suites on the eighth floor, entering the halls from a spiraling concrete stairwell. He dashed ahead of his friends and Chandler in hopes of reaching his sister. The sign on the wall in front of him showed the way to his sister's room. He rushed through the halls as fast as he could. All the rooms he came across had their doors left open, its original guests having escaped the city before the RGA's arrival.

From the door to the staircase, Chandler ran into the hallway. Margaret, Walther, Isolde, Lance, and Hannelore accompanied him. "He's out of his mind," Lance commented. "Is he really in a hurry to reunite with his sister?"

"The twins shared a close bond since they were small," Walther said.

Isolde smirked. "And it makes perfect sense for him to be acting this way."

"But don't you guys think he's being a little too frantic?" Margaret asked.

The Lovers shook their heads.

Hannelore patted Chandler's shoulder. "Where'd he go?"

"To Room 824, no doubt." He beckoned the others to follow him. "Everyone, please cut the chatter, we must hurry to the State Chancellor."

Chandler ran along the same hall Harold traveled. The others traveled alongside him. Nobody strayed away from the rest of the pack. They found Harold in the hallway outside Room 824. Harold had stopped in front of the doorway, mesmerized and stunned by the state of the room's door.

A dark boot-print was tattooed on the pale door. The imprint had the markings of several round dots above the impression of the heel. A solid rim was formed around the heel. Whoever left the print happened to be wearing a pair of

RGA-issue jackboots with hobnails and an iron heel plate. The broken hinges and locks on the door implied that someone kicked down the door to get in.

"This can't be happening," Harold murmured.

"I'm afraid so," Chandler shuddered.

Margaret covered her mouth. "She's been kidnapped."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing," Lance added.

Walther shook his head. "Regardless, we should check inside anyway. We might be able to find out what happened."

Hannelore nodded. "Then let's get it over with." She strolled into the room. Everyone else followed after her.

Harold came inside the room last. He took a moment to pay one last glimpse at the boot print on the door before rejoining the others.

A short corridor led to the presidential suite's living room. Chandler, Lance, Hannelore, Margaret, and the Lovers combed the living room and kitchen, searching for Halfrida's body. Harold walked around the kitchen and living room. No body belonging to Halfrida or anyone else was found.

In the living room, something on the floor room caught Harold's attention. He kneeled before the Persian rug in the center of the room. An empty shell casing was left on the rug.

The bullet resembled a .40 S&W round fired from a handgun. Several locks of light brown hair were strewn on the hardwood floor around the carpet, with portions of them being bleached blonde. Both the bullet and the hair appeared to be Halfrida's.

On the wall left of the corridor leading back to the hotel room door was a flat screen television. Chandler and Lance stood behind the TV, studying a bullet hole on the screen and the shattered debris on the floor beneath it.

After looking at the evidence, Harold stood up and left the living room. He wandered into the nearby hallway. The hallway led to a bedroom and a dining room with a lit chandelier. Harold checked the dining room upon finding nothing of interest in the bedroom.

A large map of the Dweller World was pinned to the wall in front of the dining table. On the table was a stack of various Dweller newspapers. The top of the stack was the June 30th issue of Mothers Den's local newspaper.

Harold grabbed the newspaper from the stack. "IDA troops repel RGA, Adelbu at La Mesa," the headline read. "This past Tuesday, soldiers of the IDA 202nd Infantry Division the 1st Adelbu Panzer Brigade and RGA forward elements at La Mesa. 1st Adelbu Panzer, the so-called '*Leibgarde Harold Brotzman*', achieved a reputation in this war."

Next to the stack was a bottle of Old Dweller Vodka, an empty shot glass, a notepad, a fountain pen and a red envelope. The envelope had the words "Modern-Day Parable of the Talents" on the front in cursive. The handwriting, along with its pretty curves, belonged to his sister.

The envelope contained a hastily written letter from Halfrida. *Dear Harold, writing this letter to you never crossed my mind until now. The bombings and news of RGA marching toward Mothers Den convinced me.*

For years, I had a feeling we were born to serve God and his Church. Everyone knew that. Yet our whole family left Horst's talent–Father Michael Agrioli's Rheingold–buried in an attic for decades. No one bothered to tell us about its significance except the Lovers, two months after we rediscovered it.

I don't blame our family for burying the 'Rheingold'. Father Agrioli was a pious man caught in the affairs of a ruthless family like ours. Sure, the family did a lot of terrible things in the past. Burying that talent was one of them.

That device I used to diffuse this subdermal implant Ostara installed into you informed me of something. The envy you had for your twin sister, three years ago. 'Why did Horst, of all people, decide to choose my tomboy sister for that scholarship? He should have chosen me. After all, the family knows that I'm supposed to be the better sibling.'

Harold, sometimes you remind me of the Prodigal Son's older brother. As I write this, I look back to the Rebirth. The news articles people wrote about you. In just three years, you turned a failing school system into an educational superpower. Even now, the thought remains surreal. You have plenty of talents to be proud of. Have some faith in me and the people around you, okay?

As for me, I didn't want to spend my high school years in Argentina, so I returned to America. Horst predicted the Incident, Brotzmanskrieg, and the Ostara Conspiracy decades beforehand. That was a byproduct of the Nornen Gerät, the so-called 'N-Gerät'. The Rebirth was all the proof we need.

The Incident compelled me to give my all to protect you and the Church. But as time went on, other questions appeared in my mind. Am I the 'Prodigal Daughter' of this story? If not, have I used my talents in the best way possible? I think God and I know the answer, but what about you, Harold?

The RGA is coming to Mothers Den. If I survive and we meet again, let's stay at the family estate with our new friends later this summer. Horst promised to come out of hiding and show us who he really is. I'm sure you're looking forward to that, right? Love, Halfrida. PS: Mom and Dad, I'm going to see you again.

Harold crumpled the entire letter into a ball and tossed into a nearby waste bin. "I'm sorry, Halfrida," he whispered to himself, "I'm sorry we were destined to go down this route in life." The map ahead of him compelled him to investigate. He approached it.

Hundreds of thumbtacks were pinned throughout the map. The thumbtacks came in blue, white and green–the same colors as the ones on the Republic Program's flag. The legend on the upper left corner of the map denoted the colors of the thumbtacks. Blues were locations of Halfrida's safehouses, the majority located in important Dweller cities like Mothers Den. Whites marked known Dweller Mob racketeering enterprises and fronts. Greens showed the locations of Conspiracy safehouses.

Few locations in the entire Dweller World had green thumbtacks. Harold glided his finger across the map, from Mothers Den to the nearest Conspiracy

safehouse. West of Mother's Den was the Waters of Rebirth, the deep, cavernous waterway that divided the Dweller World in half.

A Dweller city, Setonburg, featured a green thumbtack. It was the only one along the entire western coast of the Waters of Rebirth. "I should tell the others," Harold muttered, removing his finger from the thumbtack.

He left the dining room and rejoined the others.

***

At a small park north of the Tourist District, a black Opel Blitz with an enclosed canopy stopped behind the public fountain. The truck driver cut the engine and got out. Drusilla and the crewmates of her MAFV jumped off the bed. While the others rested underneath the shade of a nearby tree, Drusilla hauled a red toolbox. She approached the right side of the public fountain.

Jennifer was seated at the fountain. A dead RGA soldier was submerged in a pool of water. Percival stood beside her. Joseph squatted in front of them. All three were observing a knocked-out Ryanite MAFV. Drusilla walked up to them.

"Oh hey," Jennifer greeted Drusilla with a smile.

Drusilla smirked. "Good to see you all are still alive."

The four laughed. Artillery shells from the east flew overhead. Explosions rocked a building, not far from the park. Drusilla settled the toolbox on a patch of grass, kneeled before the MAFV and examined it.

The MAFV resembled a miniature Tiger Panzer, twelve feet in diameter. Its chassis and turret, as with all RGA ground vehicles, were painted steel gray. A hardened paste-like solution was coated all over the hull. "Is this what I think it is?" Drusilla muttered under her throat.

"Did you say something?" Joseph asked her.

She shook her head. From her toolbox, she grabbed a horseshoe magnet and tried to attaching it to the hull. The dried coating weakened its magnetostatic field around the armor, preventing the magnet from latching onto it. "Yup, this coating has to be *Zimmerit*," Drusilla blurted. "That went out of style after World War II."

Percival pointed at it. "What's this one called, Drusilla?"

"A Hannibal I/A Heavy MAFV," Drusilla replied. From the outside, the treads, suspension, drive sprockets, and the hull itself appeared undamaged. As an operator different MAFVs, her suspicions grew. Opening a hatch behind the turret, she pointed a flashlight at the engine and its parts. The transmission and engine were functional.

She inspected the turret's interior. The Plexiglas slits of the cupola, mounted above the turret, appeared broken. The camera inside the cupola was burnt out. The energy cells in the storage compartment on the turret's rear were flashing red. The light meant that the energy cells were depleted.

Multiple sparks flew from the Hannibal's onboard targeting computers and shock sensors. They appeared fried and destroyed beyond repair. The same was true for other electrical parts such as communications and guidance equipment. "Did someone create an electromagnetic pulse to disable it?" Drusilla said aloud.

"Is that what happened?" Jennifer wondered.

Drusilla stood up. "I've checked all the possibilities. It has to be an EMP."

"Wait, is that even possible?" Percival questioned.

"Yes," she told him. "Whatever fried this Hannibal's electronics, it has to be an EMP grenade of some kind."

Joseph shuddered. "Yikes!"

Chandler strolled into the park with several Adelburgers in tow. As he approached the fountain, he surveyed the carnage all around him. Dozens of dead RGA soldiers littered the entire area. Along the paths to the center of the park, the wreckage of several MAFVs burned. The air smelled of gasoline.

"What the hell happened here?" Chandler said upon arriving at the foundation. "Why were there so many dead RGA Panzergrenadiers and totaled MAFVs, both here and outside the park?"

"That's beyond me, Chandler," Drusilla said. "As far as I can tell, somebody dispatched this Hannibal, killed all these Ryanites and destroyed some MAFVs."

"Have you managed to contact the crew of this Hannibal?"

"No response," Drusilla reported. "I traced the signal to a burning Opel truck at a tunnel, northwest of here. Whole crew's KIA."

"And what are we planning to do with this Hannibal?" Joseph wondered.

"While the Hannibal sustained damage to its electronics, everything else is cool." Drusilla turned to Chandler. "If you can get a repair vehicle to this park, we might be able to restore it to working condition."

"Of course, but that's not the reason why I came here." Chandler crossed his arms. "In case you all don't know, Halfrida was not in her hotel room when we arrived. Someone must have kidnapped her."

"Do we know who, Chandler?"

"Who else could have taken her, Drusilla?"

***

(*Two days later*)

A lamp swung back and forth like a pendulum on the ceiling of a small, dark room. The windows were obstructed with thick cloth, preventing any outside from entering. Halfrida sat on a wooden chair, her arms and legs tied up with sturdy rope. Duct tape covered her mouth, eyes closed and head down.

Regaining consciousness, she looked up and surveyed the room. Her head darted left and right while she struggled to break free. "What the hell?" she whispered to herself. In vain, she gave up.

Someone cackled nearby. Footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor, growing louder and louder as it got closer. Halfrida's heart thumped with each passing second. A short black figure was standing in front of her.

"About time you woke up," the figured said. "I was starting to get bored."

Halfrida recognized the figure's voice. "Virgil Sapienti," she called out, "I'm jealous of your body count. Who taught you how to shoot?"

"That's irrelevant." Virgil emerged from the shadows. "What happened in my past is none of your business."

"So I hear." She sighed. "For pity's sake, how the hell did you manage to miss my shot? I swore, I swore my bullet was going to hit you."

He laughed as he circled around her. "Fate has a wicked way of showing its ugly self. You may be a crack shot with that Cz75, but you were no match for me and those IDA commandos." Virgil stopped in front of her. "After our little scuffle a few days ago, I was convinced that Fate brought us here."

"Whatever. How much did Lady Ostara pay you to kidnap me?"

"Not important," he told her.

"Care to explain why she didn't pay you to kill me?"

"Things have gotten personal. Ostara wants me to take you to her, so she can kill you herself."

"Oh, give me a break." She spat on his face again.

Virgil threw a jab at Halfrida's face, knocking her out cold.

J. N. ENRIQUEZ

Chapter Thirty: Seton's Central Railway (Ryanite Chorus; July 3rd-8th, 2014)

"Disorder in the society is the result of disorder in the family."

-St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

New Hope and Setonburg, apart from exporting D-VIII, were industrial cities. Entire armaments industries, shipyards, and MAFV and A-Wings crucial to the Independent Dweller's war effort were centered in the industrial districts of both cities. Everything in the two cities were rebuilt after a massive bombing raid, one year ago.

At Seton Harbor, IDA naval vessels were docked there. Many of the civilian and commercial boats had fled north to escape the fighting between the RGA and IDA and Underground troops. A few Underground ships with large cannons, deck guns, laser machine guns and missile batteries were also moored. No crew members were presently on deck, military police patrolled the harbor with searchlights and patrol dogs.

Up and down the western bank, enemy combat engineers had constructed an impressive array of fortifications. Machine gun crews, insulated inside pillboxes, covered kill zones blocked by dragon's teeth and barbed wire. Behind the wires, various signs bearing white skulls warned of minefields. And a few sandbag islands housed antiaircraft batteries. AA guns, FlaK cannons and a few self-propelled anti-air MAFVs made up the anti-air defenses.

The clock struck 3AM. Squadrons of Fr100Js soared over the calm waves of Rebirth Waters. In their wake came three different flights of St. Gandolph ground attack planes and two flights of Bl303 bombers.

Flying low over the water, Ga205s converged on the enemy vessels at Seton Harbor. Pilots released oxygen-propelled torpedoes into the water before regaining altitude. The torpedoes sped toward the hulls of the enemy ships, detonating on impact. Explosions erupted onboard the ships. Setonburg air raid blared, followed by New Hope's.

Ga210s, miniature twin-engine Ju88s, and the newer Ga215 attacked the coastal defenses. The Ga210s dropped bombs over pillboxes and aerial defense batteries. Like the Ga205, the Ga210s displayed accuracy and precision.

The Ga215s, miniature Henschel Hs129C attack planes, traveled at speeds faster than its predecessors. Squadrons of the A-Wing strafed enemy ground troops with plasma cannons, rockets, and cluster bombs.

Though most of the A-Wings remained airworthy, various Ryanite A-Wings were shot down by enemy AA gun crews. Two planes–a Ga205 and a Ga215–exploded in midair, crashing into the Waters.

The Bl303s carpeted the coastal defenses with hundreds of bombs over the coastal defenses and the two cities. At the same time, troop transport in the ports of Mothers Den and Kendall sailed for the cities. Tens of thousands of hardened RGA troops, trucks and MAFVs traveled across the Waters of Rebirth.

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(*Five days later*)

Setonburg and all of its districts lay in ruins. Carpet-bombings, raining shells from field and self-propelled artillery, and intense barrages of naval bombardments by two Remnants battleships from Rebirth Waters dragged on. Ground attack planes from both sides circled Setonburg. Fighters protected them from opposing fighters while engaging the enemy's.

A Ryanite Ga215 was not lucky. An Underground Fa38A riddled it full of holes and flew away as smoke and fire flowed from the Ga215's twin engines. The Ga215 plummeted into the city ruins. The left wing ripped away from the rest of the fuselage as it crashed into a short avenue.

The fallen wing glided along the street, towards Chandler's feet as he ran through it. Chandler jumped over the wing. The wing stopped gliding, mere inches away from where his feet landed on the ground. He advanced ahead. His squad, along with Harold and his friends, followed him from behind.

Intense fighting had consumed the streets and buildings of Setonburg for the past five days. Everywhere, gunfire and explosions erupted all around. In the distance, the sounds of war were endless. Ryanites and Remnants soldiers battled Underground and IDA over mounds of rubble. MAFVs on both sides combed the streets, the infantry following close by.

Artillery shells rained overhead. "Get down!" Chandler shouted, sprinting across toward the middle of an intersection. The shells landed on the buildings around im and the others. Debris descended on the streets. An artillery shell even landed a direct hit on a seven story building five hundred yards away. The foundation destroyed, the building collapsed within seconds.

Chandler dove straight into an abandoned makeshift foxhole, his coal scuttle helmet falling off his head. Harold, the Lovers, Lance, and Hannelore joined him. There was enough room in the foxhole to fit all six.

Putting his helmet back on, Chandler turned to Harold. "The enemy self-propelled artillery is at it again."

"Tell me about it," Harold said.

Walther and Isolde replaced the empty magazines on their MP40s. They swapped with them with a loaded one taped to their sides.

"Is it possible for us to get Representative Accardo to send some St. Hubert II/B shells their way?" Lance asked.

"Don't you remember?" Hannelore reminded him. "The Leibgarde's self-propelled artillery was sent to aid other divisions in the city."

The others caught up to them. Joseph and Margaret ran to the pile to the six's left flank. Margaret's siblings went for the pile on the right. The four scanned the open no man's land ahead of them.

A stray bullet almost hit Chandler's head. He and the others ducked under the foxhole. "Watch out for the sniper!" he shouted at the others.

Walther addressed the others. "Thank God you all are still alive! My wife and I thought all of you were killed during yesterday's push for city hall."

"We're still kicking," Harold said.

"In a city like this, Walther," said Chandler, "You can't be astonished by casualties alone. A whole army of IDA and Underground is hiding in the ruins."

Margaret hollered at Walther. "What's our next target?"

Chandler handed Walther his binoculars. Walther surveyed no man's land. Hundreds of yards down the road, a large building towered over the rubble.

"Which building is that again?" Lance pointed at it.

"Setonburg Central Railway Station," Walther answered, "Our next target."

Dreary silence returned to no man's land after the artillery barrage. An odorous smell of gasoline mixed with the decay of rotting corpses. In the distance, several voices cried and moaned in pain. Hundreds of dead RGA soldiers and Remnants marines littered the roads and ruined buildings. They shared the same space with dead Underground soldiers. Scorched MAFVs and metallic debris cluttered the streets. A few roads remained clear of destroyed hulks.

"Setonburg Central Railway Station is still the city's only lifeline with the rest of IDA-controlled Dweller World," Chandler commented. "We take that place, and the Dwellers and Underground here will be cut off."

"That's right," Harold agreed. "I'm convinced that Halfrida is somewhere in the city and has yet to evacuate."

"How sure are you?".

"Pretty sure, Chandler," he replied. "Look all around you. If I were Ostara or the Silent Orphan, I wouldn't want to get my sister out of whatever building she's holed up in."

"And the whole city's a mess," Hannelore added. "I'm sure the Dwellers who kidnapped Halfrida want her alive."

Walther passed binoculars to Harold. He gazed upon the dead bodies and destroyed MAFVs ahead.

Lance pinched his nose. "Did someone fart just now?"

"Must be the bodies I saw ahead of us," Walther explained. "It's been five days, and no one's been able capture Central Railway Station." He turned to Harold. "I assume you received our orders?"

"1st Adelbu Panzer Division must seize Central Railway before dusk," he said. "It's all on us to hoist the Republic's flag in the train yard."

"Is Blackstone crazy?" Hannelore doubted.

"We should just lay siege to the place," Chandler suggested.

"No, Chandler, Central Railway falls today!" Harold told the two.

Isolde yawned. "Harold's right: we're only here because we're trying to rescue Halfrida…" A bullet zoomed overhead. "Well, if they haven't already." She patted Chandler's shoulder. "No matter what happens, we're all in this together!"

"You're right. There's no turning back." Chandler pulled the magazine from his StG44, checking the number of rounds inside. The magazine was full. He reinserted the magazine.

Before long, Drusilla's Hannibal Heavy MAFV rolled through the street behind the foxhole. The Hannibal parked behind the foxhole. The long column behind it consisted of Maurice II/Gs and captured Marcella V/8s.

"Margaret, Jennifer, Percival," Accardo called out, "Get over here!" The siblings rushed to the foxhole.

"And Joe," Lance called out, "Bring us your radio."

Chandler asked the siblings, "When are your birthdays?"

"Nine more days," Percival said.

Margaret cocked her head to the side, arms crossed. "Why'd you ask?"

Chandler grabbed the slings of three PPSh41s slung over his shoulder. ""Ditch your Kar98k rifles," he told them, "Use these instead."

The siblings dropped their bolt-action rifles in the foxhole and took the submachine guns. "Thanks Chandler," they applauded.

"Wish you three an early happy birthday." He smiled.

"Kill a couple Underground and IDA soldiers with them," Walther chimed. Over the buildings, he spotted a red flare floating. "That's our cue," he told the others, "Time to get fired up, *Leibgarde*."

Hundreds of Adelburgers rushed past the foxhole. Drusilla's Hannibal and the other MAFVs followed after them. Joseph left his radio in the foxhole. Harold, Chandler the Lovers scaled the foxhole while Lance and Hannelore stayed behind with the field radio.

Joining the others, they dashed across no man's land, straight to the Central Railway's main entrance. The enemy, garrisoned behind barricaded windows, opened up. Machine guns and antitank cannons bogged down the assault, slaughtering platoons of Adelburgers. Pinned down, the other Adelburgers took cover in the alleys and inside the buildings near Central Railway.

In the chaos, Jennifer, Percival and Joseph got from Chandler and the others. The sheer volume of bullets, laser beams and plasma cannon fire from both sides prevented anyone to search for them. Taking point, Chandler led Harold, Margaret and the Lovers into an alley on their right.

He ran up to an adjacent courtyard, where hostile snipers battled a squad of Remnants marines. As bullets zipped past him, he dove behind a concrete barrier next to the courtyard entranceway. Harold and the others sprinted to his side, firing their guns at the snipers. The pinned-down Remnants fled the courtyard.

His thumb setting the StG44 on full-auto, Chandler emptied an entire magazine on the snipers. He ducked as soon as the magazine ran dry. "Cover me, I'm reloading!"

"Me too," Harold added, ducking beside him.

Chandler discarded the empty clip, swapping it for a loaded one.

The Lovers and Margaret dispatched the snipers as they reloaded.

Remerging from cover, Chandler spotted the last one. He sprayed numerous rounds until a bullet managed to hit him. The sniper's body leaned over the window before falling into the courtyard below.

Eight Adelbu combat engineers arrived at the courtyard entranceway. Three carried flamethrowers, while two pairs lugged around a large boxes of Semtex and C4 explosives. Their squad leader saluted, "Pionere-Gruppe, reporting for duty!"

Chandler saluted. "The left flank of Central Railway is just beyond this courtyard. I need your men to carry the explosives to an emergency exit behind a machine gun nest."

"I trust that your people will cover us?"

"We'll cover you."

The combat engineers scurried through the courtyard and entered an alleyway on the other side. Chandler and the others followed them. Towards the end of the alley, they discovered one of Central Railway's emergency exits. It was protected by a fortified machine gun crew, firing a Maxim machine gun. The gunners were focused on the other Adelburgers.

Pulling the pin off an egg grenade, Chandler left the alley and hurled it at them. The grenade exploded on impact, killing one of the machine gunners. Chandler motioned at the others to follow him.

"Go, go, go," he shouted, charging into the machine gun nest. A dying machine gunner reached for his holstered handgun. Chandler sprayed him with an entire magazine of bullets.

The machine gun nest cleared, Harold motioned the combat engineers to bring the explosives. "On the double," he called out to them. The combat engineers followed him to the door.

As the demolitions were being primed, Walther, Margaret, and Isolde engaged two machine gun nests covering the main entrance. The gunners, unable to reposition their machine guns, were slaughtered.

The combat engineers rigged the explosives. "Get back, get back," they shouted at Chandler's team. Both squads retreated from the machine gun nest, just as the emergency exits were blown open. Smoke emanated from the doorway. The two squads rushed into the building.

Meanwhile, on the road leading to Central Railway's main entrance, Drusilla's Hannibal came to a halt. The MAFV's cannon pointed at the sturdy metal doors at the entrance. "Load Super-Semtex round!" she said over the radio.

Her gunner responded, "Loading complete!"

"Blow those doors open!" Drusilla barked.

The Hannibal's cannon fired, sending a single shell to the doors. The shell created a spectacular explosion that left a massive hole. None of the doors remained standing. The surviving Adelburgers emerged from their positions and stormed the blown entrance.

Drusilla and the other MAFVs traveled along the road on the right side of the building. Crashing through the walls, the Ryanite MAFVs invaded the railyard behind the big terminal building. They maneuvered around smoldering trains and destroyed vehicles. At the same time, they intercepted and engaged incoming formations of enemy Marcella V/8s.

In the caverns above, Underground A-Wings appeared. Modelled after the Soviet IL-2, they strafed the Ryanite armor with unguided rockets and plasma cannon fire. A few Maurice IIs exploded behind Drusilla's Hannibal.

"Heads up," another MAFV commander said, "Enemy St. Godfrey Go-4!"

Drusilla responded, "Roger that." Taking control of a laser machine gun, mounted above her Hannibal's cupola, she aimed at the Underground Go-4s. As they prepared for another attack run, Drusilla fired away her machine gun. The steady stream of laser fire forced the Go-4s to break formation.

She continued her energy fusillade, harassing the enemy flight lead. Sustaining several hits, the flight lead's engine caught on fire. The Go-4 spiraled out of control, spewing flames as it crashed into a nearby hospital. Fires ignited inside the hospital, setting the whole building ablaze.

The burning building was displayed on her headset. "Ah geez, I hope no one was in there." The Hannibal's turret slowly rotated, its gunner acquiring a new target, she started praying. "Lord, deliver us from this battle alive and victorious!" Drusilla whispered. "Please convince the enemy to surrender this meat grinder!"

Her Hannibal locked onto an enemy MAFV and opened fire. A direct hit followed. "Amen," she said, making the sign of the cross.

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Inside the terminal building, Adelburgers tossed grenades into rooms before breaching them, their guns blazing. Flamethrower-wielders poured flames into other rooms. Upstairs, above the main lobby, a thick white smoke blanketed the hallways and rooms. Room by room, Adelburgers and Underground soldiers engaged each other at close quarters.

Somewhere, in one of the hallways, Chandler, Harold, Walther and Jennifer stopped at the corner of a wall. To their left and up ahead were two long hallways that went somewhere. "Jen," Chandler barked, "Walther, Harold and I will be clearing out the hallway on our left. I need you to cover the other hall for us."

"Got it." Jennifer lay flat on the floor. "Better get moving."

The three boys jogged up the hallway to the left. All of them disappeared in the smoke. Gunfire and loud voices kept Jennifer on edge. Her mind began playing tricks with her. "Why do I get the feeling that I'm being watched?"

Minutes passed, and Jennifer heard loud footsteps from the hallway ahead of her. A dark figure appeared. "Jennifer," a familiar voice called out, "Is that you?"

Frightened, Jennifer panicked. She closed her eyes and sprayed bullets at the figure. The figure screamed in pain, succumbing to his ill-gotten wounds. Reopening her eyes, she saw Joseph on the floor. "My God," she cried in horror, "I shot Joe!" She tossed the PPsh41 aside and hurried to him.

Jennifer settled a satchel of medical supplies on blood-soaked floor tiles. After injecting a shot of morphine sulfate into Joseph's bloodstream, Jennifer prepared to operate on him.

"N-no…, I-I'm a…goner," Joseph whispered in her ear. His eyelids grew heavy. "Just…let me rest…l-let me rest…" His head dropped to the floor.

"Please don't die on me! Stay with me!"

As he lay dying, Joseph gathered the last of his strength to speak. "Don't…blame yourself…T-this…ha-happens in war…"

"But I didn't mean to shoot you!"

The morphine circulating his body, Joseph cracked a smile. "I-I forgive you…Tell Henry…my brothers…in Philly…" He lost consciousness.

Gunfire broke out all around Jennifer. She closed Joseph's eyes, covered her eyes with blood-soaked hands and mourned. "Why, what have I done?!" Her voice echoed the hallway, attracting someone's attention.

From the corridor behind her, Jennifer heard more footsteps. She turned her head. Two teenage boys, dressed in khaki fatigues and Soviet-style helmets, confronted her with PPS-43 submachine guns.

They were Underground soldiers. "Hey, what the hell happened here?" one of them asked Jennifer.

His buddy noted the large green crosses on Jennifer's white Stahlhelm. "You're a medic, aren't you?"

"Do I deserve to be called one after what I did to Joseph?!" Jennifer snapped.

"What's gotten into you?" the first soldier demanded.

At the top of her lungs, Jennifer screamed, "My late friend, I shot him by mistake! You have to believe me!"

Opposite from where the Underground soldiers came, Margaret and Percival emerged from the smoke. They rushed to Jennifer's aid after hearing her. "Drop your weapons!" they shouted at the soldiers.

The soldiers refused. Margaret and Percival wasted them. They comforted their sister. "It's going to be okay, Jen." Margaret hugged Jennifer like a compassionate mother. "Tell me what happened."

"Joseph," Jennifer confided to her, "I-I…killed him."

"You have no reason to blame yourself." Percival crossed his arms. "Joseph should have stayed with us and the others."

Tears fell from Jennifer's eyes. "S-so who's to blame for this?"

"Other than Joseph's stubbornness," Margaret replied, "No one."

The voice of Chandler bellowed from the other hallway. "Please, someone, anyone, help me out here!"

"He's in trouble," said Percival. "We need to go, Margaret."

"We should." Margaret nodded. "Will you be alright by yourself, Jennifer?"

"Just go on without me."

Margaret hesitated to leave her sister behind.

Percival shouted, "What are you waiting for? We need to help Chandler!" He ran to the direction of the noise.

"Just go," Jennifer told her sister.

Margaret sighed. She trailed after Percival.

Meanwhile, Jennifer heard the dying whimpering of one of the Underground soldiers. "M-molly, I-I'm sorry…, sorry I couldn't…come home…I gave m-my all…a bright light ahead of me…should I…come closer…?"

The dying soldier, his perception distorted, mistook Jennifer as his lover. "Come into the light," she told him. "We'll be reunited again in the end."

"Okay…" The soldier entered the light. As his soul entered the light, his mind conjured images of his deceased grandparents, his childhood pet, and dead war buddies. "Hey everyone…it's nice…nice to…see y-you all…again…" He succumbed to his wounds.

Jennifer removed her helmet, dragged her knees to the soldier, and made the sign of the cross. "What a shame," she muttered. "I'm tired of seeing this sight. Brotzmanskrieg needs to end…" She clasped her hands and prayed in silence.

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(*A few minutes earlier*)

In the other hallway, far from the others, Chandler, Harold and Walther were accosted by three elite Underground soldiers. A personal brawl broke out between the six Catholics. The ones Walther and Harold fought ran away from them. They chased after the two soldiers.

Chandler continued to engage the one in front of him. He swung the butt of his rifle at the enemy's head.

The soldier dodged it. He plunged the bayonet of his SKS rifle toward Chandler's chest. Chandler back-pedaled, the blade missing him by mere inches. The soldier relented and Chandler lunged towards him.

Side-stepping, the soldier avoided Chandler's attack. "So you Ryanites are 'liberating' the city, huh?"

Chandler nodded. They resumed fighting. "I figured," the enemy remarked, "Seeing how this city is named after St. Elizabeth Ann Seton."

"What's that supposed to be mean?" Chandler asked, dodging another attack.

The Underground soldier responded in a violent manner. Swiftly, he bashed Chandler's head with a swift rifle butt and stuck his bayonet into Chandler's abdomen. The pain alone forced Chandler to drop his StG44. The soldier knocked Chandler off his feet, kicking his rifle aside.

As Chandler reached for his S&W Mark 39, holstered on his right hip, the solder planted his jackboot over his chest. He pointed the barrel of his rifle at Chandler's head. "No sudden moves," the soldier warned, "If you value your life."

Chandler's hand remained firmly rested on the grip of his handgun. "Please, someone, anyone, help me out here!"

"Don't bother," the soldier told him, "I'm taking you with me if they stop me. I've always wanted to have a dialogue with you guys."

"Is that so? Well, I'm an Adelburger, and you're a soldier of the Catholic School Underground. What motivates you and your peers?"

"Unlike you, I fight for a real cause," he retorted. "GACSS, the old parochial school model, looks more like a decrepit nun on life support. In this post-Vatican II world, the future of Catholic Education belongs to homeschooling."

"But do we have to slay fellow Catholics in the name of Catholic education?"

"Of course not, but the Underground didn't fire the first shot. You did."

A dark figure snuck behind the enemy soldier. It bashed his head with a portable trench shovel. The soldier slumped to the floor.

It was Margaret. "What a load of crap." She dropped the shovel.

Percival, Walther and Harold rushed inside the room, guns drawn. "Where is he, Chandler?" Percival asked him.

"You can put the gun down, Percival." Margaret crossed her arms.

Relieved, Chandler made the sign of the cross. "Thank God, you all came."

Beyond the walls, out in the train yard, gunfire and explosions subsided. Walther strolled to a window overlooking the train yard, situated next to a balcony. He motioned the others to look outside with him.

"What's going on?" Harold asked. He and Percival joined by the window. Margaret went into the balcony.

Chandler got back up. "Did we win?"

"Yeah, for now," Margaret replied.

He went to the balcony A clear view of the railyard greeted him. Over the smoke and flames stood a flagpole that bore a tattered flag of the Republic Program. Drusilla's Hannibal and her crew's Opel truck were parked beside it. Aside from destroyed train cars were countless bodies and destroyed vehicles.

"We finally captured Central Railway Station…," Harold muttered.

"Lost a lot of people," Percival added.

"But Percival, it had to be done," Margaret spoke.

Jennifer ran into the room. "Chandler," she called out. Isolde, Hannelore and Lance accompanied her. Lance straddled the radio that once belonged to Joseph.

Chandler, Margaret, Percival, Harold and Walther turned around. Jennifer placed a dog tag in Chandler's hand. "Give this to Accardo."

"Whose dog tag is this?"

"Joseph MacDonald," Jennifer said, "Confirmed KIA."

"Cause of death: friendly fire," Isolde added.

Hannelore shook her head. "Sorry to hear that."

"Things are going to be a lot boring around here with him gone." Lance reached the metal canteen on his field webbing and washed away the dirt and sweat all over his face.

Chandler put the dog tag in his pocket. Everyone left the balcony and joined Drusilla and her Hannibal's crew, downstairs, in the railyard.

Chapter Thirty One: Reichs Of The Third Reich (Ryanite Chorus; July 10th-18th, 2014)

"In the spring of 1944 Hitler approved of Himmler's proposal to build an ϟϟ-owned industrial concern in order to make the ϟϟ permanently independent of the state budget. […] In case a successor should try to use the state budget as an instrument to curtail the power of the ϟϟ and Gestapo, Hitler wanted to create a financial source to provide the ϟϟ with its own budget."

-Albert Speer, Infiltration: How Heinrich Himmler Schemed to Build an ϟϟ Industrial Empire

Ryanite St. Hubert II/Bs, outside the Ryanite-held IDA naval shipyard northeast of Central Railway, hurled plasma bolts. Artillery from the 231st RGA Infantry Division pounded the district from the Central Railway's railyard. The bombardment was directed against Black Widow Heights, the diamond on the Setonburg's twenty-four karat crown.

The district housed all of Setonburg's impressive armaments industries, on par with those of the city's southern neighbor, New Hope. Even as the battle raged on, Dweller workers toiled around the clock, building weapons, vehicles and other equipment for the embattled defenders.

As Ryanite artillery shells descended on the factories, the unpaid workers resumed working. Underground troops garrisoned windows and rooftops throughout the area. The golden Sacred Heart of Jesus patches on their sleeves were the proud emblem of the Underground's *Christus Rex* Armored Corps. On the roads, their matte-amber Marcella and Vladimir MAFVs parked behind sandbags and mounds of rubble taken from fallen buildings.

The *Christus Rex* dug trenches around remaining buildings, reinforced with plywood boards. The ground in front of factory entrances remained untouched. Enemy sappers connected each trench to a ruined grain elevator at the center of Black Widow Heights. A long, winding trench followed along the main road to a tractor factory.

The front entrance of main tractor building read, *Dolan & Sons Tractors and Combines*. Trucks dropped off crates of ammunition for MAFVs at the loading yard, a courtyard in the center of the complex. Workers hauled them into the building with forklifts.

Beyond the study steel doors of the loading bay, a revolving moving assembly line carried columns of Ingrid 200s. As Ryanite shells rained over their heads, the Ingrids were rushed to completion without properly installed gunsights into their coaxial turrets and hull cannons. The finished ones rolled out of the building to aid in the city's defense.

In the east side of the district, Hanomag halftracks drove up the main road, accompanied by Leibgarde traveling on foot. Destroyed buildings, mangled corpses from both sides, burnt-out MAFVs and other vehicles surrounded them. Artillery shells from the south and east flew overhead. Black smoke billowed up from burning buildings, a dark haze hung over the area.

Chandler jogged beside the lead Hanomag, a flamethrower strapped to his back. Lance, Hannelore and the three Richardson siblings followed him in a straight line. Up ahead, they spotted Drusilla's Hannibal crossing a trench. The vehicle stopped in front of it.

They advanced ahead of the Hanomag, crossed the street in front of it, and ran toward the trenches. Companies of Adelburgers occupied the foxholes and trenches. Platoons of Maurice II/Gs, were positioned along the rubble of collapsed buildings nearby.

At a trench in the center of the field, Harold waved at Chandler. The Lovers lingered beside him, their backs against his friends. A dead Christus Rex member rested on their right, his rifle buried under a puddle of mud.

Walther scanned the area ahead of no man's land with binoculars, elbows touching the cold ground. Three bombed-out factory buildings stood behind the grain elevators. Machine gunners nested on the third floor, platoons in the trenches up front.

Chandler jumped into the trench. "Thank God you cleared the mess behind us," he told Harold.

"Don't thank me." Harold pointed at the Hannibal. "Drusilla deserves the credit for leading the way after we seized Central Railway and the shipyard."

Percival came last. As he joined the others, his finger was caught on the trigger of a PPsh41. The barrel pointing toward no man's land, he shot several rounds at the cavern ceiling.

The gunshots echoed throughout Black Widow Heights. The noise shattered the brief silence following the artillery bombardment. Margaret slapped her brother. "You Idiot!"

"Ow," he said, clutching his cheek. "What the hell was that for?"

"You gave our position away!" she screamed. "Duchess Perpetua and the *Christus Rex* know we're here! All this waiting was for nothing because of you!"

Isolde turned to Margaret. "Keep your voice down," she whispered.

"Ja, we don't them to know we're here," Walther added, his tone nonchalant.

The girl with glasses shook her head.

Machine guns roared from the factories. Bullets kicked up the dirt in front of the entrenched Adelburgers. Everyone ducked to avoid the bullets.

"It doesn't matter who gave us away," Chandler yelled over the gunfire. "What matters is that we take the tractor factory beyond the grain elevator."

"There might be enemies in the grain elevator, Chandler." Hannelore pointed at the concrete tower that loomed ahead. A few bullets whizzed over her head.

Lance poked the upper half of his head out of the trench. "Yeah, do we need to capture that building as well?"

"The rest of the Leibgarde will take it for us. Focus on the tractor factory."

The *Dewy-Princess* and the other nearby Maurice II/Gs advanced forward. The radio on Chandler's person began to crackle. He answered it. "What do you got for us, Dewy-Princess?"

The Maurices tilted the barrels of their cannons up. Each fired a white smoke canister that exploded into clouds of smoke. The smoke thickened, concealing the MAFVs' movements. The Leibgarde's Panzergrenadiers followed after them.

"That's our cue," Harold told the others, rifle slung over his shoulders. In a hurry, he pulled out his Sig Saucer P210, climbed out of the trench and stormed the factory buildings alongside the others.

Chandler shouted at him. "What the hell are you doing, Harold?"

Harold ignored him. He merged with the other Panzergrenadiers. They and the Maurices up front rushed through the smoke, disappearing from view. Chandler struggled to climb out of the trench, the Flammenwerfer FmW 41 overburdening him. Margaret held onto the flamethrower tanks, keeping stuck in the trench. "What the hell, Margaret?"

"Just let him go," Margaret told him and the others. "We're only here because he wanted to see his Fascist sister again!"

The glasses girl's comments infuriated Chandler. "What do you have against my girlfriend, Margaret?"

"Lots of things," she whined. "She's an out of control, gun-crazed wingnut who started this freaking war! Can't you all see that thousands have died here over a single week?" She frowned at Chandler. "You should have followed your discernment to the priesthood when you still had the chance!"

"Then why are you here if you're going to complain?"

"Nobody asked any of us to come here!" Arms crossed, Margaret looked away from him. "Harold wanted me to be with him this whole time, anyway."

"Whatever, I'm not going to let him die on us again." Chandler climbed out of the trench and ran into the smoke.

Lance whispered in Hannelore's ear. "What's gotten into them all of a sudden?" He pointed at Margaret.

"I don't know," Hannelore whispered back. "She's been on a rollercoaster of emotions ever since Mothers Den."

They trailed after Chandler and Harold. The Lovers followed suit.

Margaret stayed behind with her siblings and Lance's field radio.

"Shouldn't you go with the others?" Jennifer asked her sister.

"Why should I?" Margaret replied. "I don't want to die with the others."

Percival's eyes narrowed. "You got to be kidding." He crossed his arms.

"D-VIII would come in handy at a time like this," Jennifer muttered.

"Am I suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?" Margaret pointed at her chest. "I'm not!"

"Jen, don't ever suggest that again," Percival said. "The last thing I'd want now is an addict in the family."

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In the enemy trenches past no man's land, the *Leibgarde's* superior numbers overwhelmed the defenders. Flamethrower wielders poured streams of fire into the trenches, flushing a squad of entrenched Christus Rex out of their positions.

The enemy retreated into the buildings and beyond. Anyone who stayed was slaughtered by *Leibgarde* Panzergrenadiers.

At middle the factory, an amber Vladimir crashed through the wall. Harold ran into the doorway on its left. Its guns blazing, the Vladimir rolled toward the trench ahead. The turret began rotating to the right.

From a small, shallow crater, Walther lit the oily rag of a Molotov cocktail. "GACSS sends your family its kindest regards, Dweller *Schwein*!" He chucked it at the enemy MAFV and dove back into the crater amidst a shower of laser beams.

The Molotov landed atop the Vladimir's diesel engine. Flames ignited. The MAFV halted as the fires spread, sparks flying out of the turret's cupola like Polish fireworks. Chandler, Lance, and Hannelore rushed past it. They entered the building through the same doorway, disappearing in the smoke that emanated from the factory floor.

Walther reemerged from the crater. "*Los*, *Isolde*, *meine Liebe*!" he said, turning to her on his left, "We need to catch up with the others!" Walther climbed out of the crater with his wife. They ran to the doorway, Adelburgers and a Maurice II/G passing by them from behind.

The doorway led to a staircase. The short corridor ahead led to the factory floor. Smoke poured out of the large area. Screaming and shooting echoed from upstairs. "Yo, we got the State Chancellor in here," someone declared, followed by several gunshots.

"Don't let him escape!" another voice barked.

The Lovers trudged up the stairs to look for Harold and the others.

Upstairs on the second floor, in a hallway past the staircase, Chandler peeked around the corner. Five enemy soldiers ran across the building to a doorway in the rear of the building. The doorway led to a fire escape–a rear gangway overlooking another staircase. The soldiers ran up the steps to the third floor.

Chandler turned to Hannelore and Lance. They leaned against the wall.

"Is the path ahead of us clear?" Hannelore asked.

Lance added, "We can go now, right, Chandler?"

"Yeah, should be clear." He looked around the corner again. "Let's go."

They treaded into the hall. Gunfire erupted from a room on their right. Chandler, Hannelore, and Lance piled up outside the room. All three peeked into the room at the same time.

Several *Christus Rex* were crouched at the windows. They had their backs against Chandler, unaware of his presence or Hannelore and Lance's. With his back against the wall, Chandler twirled his body around and stopped at the doorway. Jet streams of fire engulfed the entire room.

The soldiers inside screamed and flayed their arms in the air like chickens, flames tearing away at their flesh and clothes. Lance and Hannelore ran inside with PPS-43s and pumped them full of bullets.

The Lovers ran into Chandler in the hallway. Lance and Hannelore exited the room to meet them. "About time you two showed up," Hannelore told them.

"Where's Harold?" Walther asked.

Chandler stood in silence. He didn't nod or shake his head. Both of his ears had been ringing for the last several minutes.

Walther turned to Lance and Hannelore. "Have you seen him?"

"*Nein*, not a clue," Lance answered.

Hannelore's shoulders rose. "I lost sight of him earlier."

"Then come with us." Isolde gestured the three to follow her and Walther.

Together, they ran to the other side of the second floor and entered the rear staircase through a fire exit. They climbed up the stairs to the top floor and arrived in a hallway full of dead *Christus Rex*. Empty shell casings in various calibers left on the concrete floor.

Across the hall, Harold placed both hands on his knees, his back bent as he tried to catch his breath. The five ran towards him, the sounds of their footsteps bouncing on the walls. Harold adjusted his posture and faced them. Specks of dust fell onto his helmet from the ceiling.

"*Verdammt*," Walther said to him, "What the hell were you thinking?"

"You almost got us worried back there," Hannelore added.

"I just wanted to get this over with, so I can see Halfrida again," Harold explained. "Do you all want to go home and leave her to Virgil Sapienti?"

Nobody responded, but everyone knew the answer. Chandler sighed. "I want to see her as much as you do, Harold." He pointed his thumb at the wall behind him. "But what you did back there was reckless, even for me and the rest."

"*Er ist richtig*," Isolde said. "We almost lost you back in the March 21st Plot. How could you see her again if you end up dying on us?"

The *Leibgarde* secured the floors below them and other two buildings. Minute by minute, the gunfire and explosions shifted further west. Harold tilted his head left, at a window inside an empty room. The grain elevator loomed large to the west. "So that's the tall building we talked about earlier." He went in the room to get a better look.

The others followed him, their guns still drawn. They piled up behind Harold to watch the carnage unraveling beyond the three factory buildings. Outside, Drusilla's Hannibal charged toward the grain elevator head on. Several Maurice II/Gs and dozens of Adelburgers on its left, more on the right. With shock and awe, they drove the enemy away from the trenches around the grain elevator.

"Is Black Widow Heights ours, Harold?" Chandler turned him.

"No Chandler," the State Chancellor replied. "We're entering the gates of hell itself, except this is a hundred times worse."

***

(*Eight days later*)

For over a week, *Leibgarde* and *Christus Rex* wrestled over the tall grain elevator and the tractor factory. Nine or eleven times, control shifted from one side to another. *Leibgarde* held both for a couple hours on one day, the *Christus Rex* recaptured it the next and so on. Once midnight heralded July 18th, the Republic flag was hoisted over the roof of the Dolan & Sons Tractor Factory.

Harold plopped down on a couch inside a breakroom on the third floor. A recent counterattack to recapture the tractor factory by the Christus Rex left him exhausted. Yawning, he closed his eyes and dozed off.

Walther and Isolde lay on separate sleeping bags beside him, their backs against the wall. A thick blanket covered their legs and feet.

Margaret, Lance, and Hannelore huddled around a burning fuel barrel at the center of the room. The fluorescent lights over their heads flickered on and off to no end. With mess kits, they took turns placing their meals over the open flames to warm them.

Drusilla sat on a pile of sandbags in the corner of the room, head tilted toward a window on her right. An MG42 mounted on a tripod was mounted behind the window. For whole minutes, she stared at the remains of a munitions factory ahead of Dolan & Sons. In the streets below, she overheard the dying groans and whimpers of Ryanites and Underground. Their voices, dwindling by the minute, kept her awake, kept her on edge.

"They're not giving up, Duchess Perpetua," Princess Philomena complained.

"Neither are we!" Baroness Felicity screamed. "Now shut up or go to bed!"

"Why are we having this conversation in the first place?" Countess Cecilia whined. "Can't you see I'm trying to fix our freaking MAFV?"

"It's three in the morning," Duchess Perpetua howled. "Go back to sleep!"

Pretty much everyone from both sides was on edge. The buzzing, beehive-like sound of flying discs hovering around overhead made life even more stressful. Loudspeakers played *Der Tod in Flandern* (Death in Flanders) every night at 3:33AM. The dying groans of Catholic schoolers and homeschoolers left to die.

West of Black Widow Heights, a Ryanite artillery bombardment showered a gated suburban neighborhood, 'Paradise'. The shelling dragged on into the night, leaving behind massive craters in the streets and whatever house that remained. Not a single shell managed to hit a lone house sitting on a hill in the distance.

Chandler walked into the room. "Margaret," he called out to her, "You got a second? The surgeons wanted me to talk to you about your siblings."

"Are they going to be alright?" Margaret asked.

"They didn't tell me." He gestured at her. "It's best that you come with me."

Margaret nodded. She left her dinner on a table to her left and exited the room. Chandler took to the room next to the one Harold and the others were in.

Lance and Hannelore ate their meals at the table. There were no chairs, they remained standing.

While they were eating, Hannelore gazed at Drusilla. The girl seated by the window appeared lost in thought. "What are you thinking about?" she asked her.

Drusilla turned her head to her. "Nothing in particular," she replied, "Just hoping we'll be able to find Halfrida soon."

"You worried about the people outside?" Lance said.

"I guess you could say that, Lance." Drusilla returned to the window.

Inaudible voices sprang from the munitions factory. A muzzle, poking of a window, flashed. The bullets zipped into the breakroom, colliding on the wall above the doorway.

Harold and the Lovers were awakened. They grabbed their weapons, resting on the walls of the room. Lance and Hannelore did the same, while Chandler and Margaret rushed back to the backroom from next door. The latter manned the MG42, the others joining them at the window. For a few minutes, they exchanged potshots at the Christus Rex inside the munitions plant.

"Everyone," Drusilla shouted, "Stop shooting!"

They stepped away from the window and looked at her with awkward gazes, their guns down. "What are you talking about?" Chandler questioned.

"We were fired upon," Walther said.

"Haven't we all seen enough death already?" Drusilla uncrossed her legs. "I'm sure the *Christus Rex* is through with this. Perhaps we can reason with them."

Chandler's eyebrows rose. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

She nodded. "I do. It's about time we have a little truce for once."

Margaret sighed. "Drusilla has a point," she told the others.

"I guess," Hannelore yawned, "How about you, Lance?"

Lance paused. "I can't see why not?"

Harold grabbed the stick. He scurried to the window. Chandler, Walther and Isolde protested by blocking the windows.

"Nein, Harold, we won't let you," Walther told him. "What Drusilla and the others are suggesting is contact with the enemy."

"Does High Command have a clue what's going on out here?"

"Doesn't matter." Chandler crossed his arms. "Rules are rules."

"To hell with the rules!" Hannelore stomped her foot on the floor. "We will not consign the fates of more lives to this Godforsaken city!" She pointed at Chandler and the Lovers. "The blood of everyone still remaining in this Adelbu *Panzer-Division* will be on your hands!"

Margaret teeth jittered against each other. "Surgeons are operating on my siblings! I don't want the enemy to interrupt them!"

"I'm not Catholic, but this war you guys and the Underground are waging is starting to get out of hand." Lance scratched an itch on his scalp.

"And I haven't slept in two days!" Drusilla shouted. "I want sleep, dammit!"

Tension filled the air inside the breakroom. Everyone was pitted against each other. They had fought together up to this point, but now want to kill each other to get what they want. As the others reached for the handguns on their holsters, Harold stood between them. He held up an open hand against them.

"This has gone too far," Harold quarreled.

"Step aside, Harold," Isolde barked. "There are those amongst us who are unworthy of being your bodyguards!"

The other seven drew their handguns. Guns cocked, fingers on the trigger, they pointed them at one another. "This doesn't solve anything!" Nobody wanted to listen to Harold anymore.

Desperate, he raised his SIG Sauer against the others. "None of you fire a single shot!" He cocked his gun at Chandler's head. "I'll kill you all myself if I must, starting with you!"

"You wouldn't dare," Chandler hissed at him.

"Try shooting someone and watch what happens," Harold said. "Is this what we have devolved into? Friends coming at each other's throat over my sister's hare-brained idea to form this *Leibgarde*? What is the matter with you people?!"

"All of you entered my life because you believed my family should do the right thing. After everything they did in the Third Reich, this is my only chance to redeem my family's name. If none of you are willing to look at the enemy or other Ryanites as fellow human beings, why are you with me?"

Chandler sighed. "What were we thinking?" He put his gun away.

"You were all just inches away from murdering each other!" Harold yelled. "All of you will waste the Talents God gave you! We're all tired; everyone wants *Brotzmanskrieg* to end, but we can't do that unless you let me start with a truce."

Everyone paused, their guns still pointed at one another. An eternity passed. Seconds turned into minutes, minutes into hours. No clocks were mounted on the walls, and nobody carried a watch on them. Without warning, one after another, they put their guns down.

"I just hope you know what you're doing, Harold," Walther told him.

"Should the enemy fire upon us, we will fire back," Chandler warned.

"*Naturlich*," Isolde added.

The Lovers and Chandler stepped aside. Harold proceeded past them. Leaning over the windowsill, he waved the white flag outside the window. Drusilla, Lance, Margaret, and Hannelore formed a human barrier behind him.

"As the State Chancellor of the Republic Program, I hereby demand a brief truce!" Harold's voice blared across the quiet warzone.

Duchess Perpetua, the acting commanding officer of the *Christus Rex* armored corps pulled up some windows on the munitions factory. "What is it, yokel?" she called out to him with tone-deaf ears. "I'm trying to get some sleep…"

"I want a truce!" Harold shouted as loud as he could, waving the flag some more as he spoke.

Perpetua consulted her cousins, standing alongside her behind a window somewhere in the other building. They whispered to one another before Perpetua continued speaking to Harold. "We'll accept the truce if you accept our terms."

"Tell me what you want," Harold yawned.

"We want to send our medics to retrieve our fallen," Perpetua suggested. "Now, as you know, this isn't the set Joseph Vilsmaier's 1993 movie, *Stalingrad*, starring Dominique Horwitz, Thomas Kretschmann, Jochen Nickel, and Sebastian Rudolph. Can I trust you that none of you will fire on us?"

"Sure, if let us get some sleep for once."

Chapter Thirty Two: Sapienti's Place (Ryanite Chorus; July 15th-19th, 2014)

"Read on to the end of this book and you might be launching America's nuclear arsenal with me, Halfrida Brotzman! I'm told the US still has 1,488 warheads, so supplies are limited!"

-Halfrida Brotzman

Staring at the metallic door, Halfrida leaned on a concrete wall, arms crossed. She was held in a cramped cellar beneath a house somewhere in Setonburg. The rampant crescendo of gunfire and explosions upstairs, for the past several days, never ceased to bore her. "Sounds like they're having fun," she said.

An explosion overhead vibrated the ceiling, causing a wire-connected light bulb to swing. The shockwave was so great that it knocked her off her feet. The wire snapped and the bulb shattered on the ground. The cellar went pitched-black.

Halfrida got back on her feet. The metallic cellar door in front of her opened. Light from an adjacent hallway entered. Halfrida shielded her eyes from both the light and Virgil. "Bored?" she snorted.

"Just checking if you're still alive," he mused.

"Well, now you know." She grinned. "I don't die easily, Virgil."

"Don't give me that snarky attitude, just because you're my hostage. I'll kill you in your sleep if I have to."

"You're nothing but talk, you know that?" Halfrida mocked. "You abducted me because Lady Ostara paid you, is that it?"

Virgil was dumbfounded. "Huh, how the hell did you figure that out?"

"No upstanding IDA soldier would work with a terrorist like her." Halfrida shook her head, her arms crossed and her eyes facing the floor. "A mercenary is what you are. To me, you're just a mindless gunman and nothing else."

As Halfrida laughed, Virgil pulled out his Welrod. "Do you value your life?"

"Cheer up," Halfrida said. "At least consider my offer. Why don't you work for me and my sissy twin brother instead?"

Virgil turned around and slammed the door shut. He trudged up a flight of stairs and entered the desolate remains of a kitchen.

Upstairs, damaged walls were replaced with sandbags and plywood planks. Three IDA commandos were positioned around a field radio at a dining table. Their weapons were leaning on some sandbags that they used to barricade the gaping hole of one wall.

The commandos saluted him. "Have we reestablished contact with Lady Ostara?" Virgil asked. "What about the intense shelling by the Remnants' navy?"

One commando, seated at the table, turned to him. "Contact's been reestablished, sir. Naval bombardments are incapable of hitting this far inland."

"Then what the hell was that explosion from?" Virgil bemused.

"Ryanite MAFVs equipped with self-propelled artillery. Do you still want to get in touch with her?"

Virgil nodded. "Give me a few minutes of some alone time."

The other commandos left the house. Virgil picked up the field radio's telephone. He switched the frequencies on a knob until he heard Ostara's voice. "Silent Orphan," she howled, "Respond!"

Virgil spoke into the phone. "I'm listening. Talk to me."

"Have you extracted the VIP out of Setonburg?"

"With the way things are here, it's no longer possible."

"What is this insolence, Silent Orphan?! I thought I paid you to take Halfrida out of the city at once!"

"There's been a complication, yesterday morning," Virgil said. Sporadic gunfire and explosions echoed in the distance. "Underground's 25th Light Infantry Battalion was destroyed at Setonburg Central Railway Station. Ryanite Adelburgers have caught up to us."

"As I suspected," Ostara muttered. A brief silence ensued, followed by distant sounds of her cursing in German.

"Ostara, are you still there? Where are you heading now?"

No response. Virgil repeated himself until Ostara returned to the phone. "My men are evacuating to Eastland, Otherworld's Asia," she replied. "Once there, we'll disperse before July ends."

"Be ready to pay up if I make it out of here with Halfrida."

"Naturlich, you'll get your pay soon enough."

"That's what I want to hear. See you around, Ostara." Virgil put the phone done. He whistled his commandos to come back inside.

The radio operator spoke to Virgil. "Sir, what's our next move?"

"Central Railway's still under Ryanite hands?"

The commando nodded. "Did that loss pose any bearing on our plans, sir?"

"It did," Virgil told him. "We're now cut off from the rest of Underground and IDA forces in Setonburg. For now, let's hunker down and wait for reinforcements from out west to arrive."

The radio operator snapped his fingers. "Sapienti, did you hear about the Fellowship of Young Christians and the People's Northwestern Union?"

Virgil rolled his eyes. "You know I hate gawking about politics, right?"

"Yes, but it *might* turn the tide of *Brotzmanskrieg*," the commando stressed.

"What are you implying?"

"FYC and PNU heads are having a conference alongside Emperor Raynerson and Prime Minister Ludwig at New Yalta. You know, at that Blueblood resort town in Western Commonwealth territory?" From the table, the operator grabbed his codebook and opened it. Inside was a piece of paper with a decoded message.

Taking the paper, Virgil glanced at it. "FYC and Union will be entering Brotzmanskrieg soon," it read. "Expect divisions of troops from both Great Powers to reach Setonburg."

"That's great." Virgil smiled. An idea manifested in his mind. "I'm heading back to the cellar to interrogate the prisoner," he said to his subordinate. "Let me know if anything new comes up."

"Sure thing," answered the radio operator.

Virgil scurried through the kitchen and down the flight of stairs. He approached the cellar door and reopened it. "Mind if we talk for a few minutes?"

"Not a problem," Halfrida replied, "I'm all ears…"

"So you're the twin brother of Harold Brotzman?"

Halfrida nodded with a smile. "What's this all of a sudden?"

Virgil closed the door. "Listen, I may be on Ostara's payroll, but I really don't care with the politics of Brotzmanskrieg."

"Is she not paying you enough?"

"Pretty much," Virgil answered. "She hasn't paid me in weeks."

"Hmm, is that so?" Halfrida's eyebrows rose. "Not surprised to hear that. The wretched hag reminds me of a cutthroat anyway."

"That's why I'm thinking about what you have to offer. I was hoping that you might be more generous with the pay."

"You bet I will!" Halfrida pointed at his chest. "Look at me: I'm a Brotzman! I'm loaded with trillions of dollars; some of that isn't coming from my family!"

Virgil chuckled. "So what, if I decide to work for you in the next ten minutes, we can launch a nuke at some country somewhere?"

Halfrida cracked a smile. "Damn right! I got, like, twenty warheads, so supplies are limited!"

"You can't be serious!" Virgil smirked. "Your family has nuclear weapons?"

"Who says we didn't have any?"

Virgil's jaw dropped. "Man, I should've met you sooner."

"I know, right?"

"What are the terms and conditions? Where do we begin?"

"Well, let's see…" Halfrida paused. "I know that someone is going to rescue me at some point, so don't shoot any of them, okay?"

"You mean the Adelburgers?"

"Exactly," Halfrida answered. "Shoot any of them, and you can kiss that nuclear launch code goodbye."

"Okay," said Virgil, "I think I can roll with that."

"No way, are you serious?"

Virgil nodded. "Working for you sounds like fun."

"We have a deal?" Halfrida held out her hand.

"Yes," Virgil shook her hand, "We do."

***

(*Four days later*)

In the cafeteria of the tractor factory at Setonburg's Industrial District, Chandler laid his head on a table. The past seventy two hours of fighting had left him drained and exhausted. Outside, a stray artillery shell landed on a stack of barrels in a loading yard. Loud explosions erupted, barrels burst into flames.

Eyes flew open. Ears had captured loud footsteps emanating from a hallway to his left. He pointed his StG44 and at the entranceway.

A perplexed Harold stood by the entranceway with a leather rucksack, his hands up. "Be careful where you're pointing that."

Relieved, Chandler put his rifle down. "Sorry," he apologized. "Did Drusilla deliver today's rations?"

"She did." Harold walked up to Chandler and sat on a chair in front of him. From the rucksack, he pulled out two sets of rations. "Which one do you want?"

"What did Drusilla give you?"

"The first meal is lamb stew, pork sausage and sauerkraut. The other has lobster ravioli, beef salad and potatoes."

"I'll take the first one," said Chandler. With the box on his lap, Chandler opened it. Everything was packaged inside strong, sturdy foil trays.

After saying grace, Harold asked, "Get enough sleep?"

"Your feet woke me up." He finished his meal and set it aside.

"Isn't that a normal occurrence in this city?"

"Yeah, I suppose." Chandler crossed his arms.

"These past few nights were pretty rough. It's a pity that thousands are dying each day. Casualties are soaring, ever since we initiated Case Red last month."

Walther entered the cafeteria in a black double-breasted coat and white Sam Browne belt over his Fackelträger suit. A gasmask covered his eyes, the eyelids glowing amber.

"Is that new 'Type II Fackelträger', Walther?" Chandler asked.

"Drusilla received some Type IIs with our rations," Walther replied, the gasmask transmitting his voice through a built-in radio. "After last night's successes, we're not far from seizing Sapienti's Place."

"The place everyone has failed to capture," Chandler muttered. "An affluent neighborhood called Paradise."

"There's a good chance Halfrida's there," Harold said. "When are we leaving? We should go as soon as possible."

"Whenever you two are done eating," Walther told him.

"Then let's get this over with." Harold set his rations aside on the table and got up from his chair. "You'll fight alongside me as always, Chandler?"

Chandler nodded. "You can depend on me." He uncrossed his arms.

Together, the three boys left the cafeteria. Outside, several more explosions broke out in the distance, along with brief gunshots.

***

(*Three hours later*)

Clad in Type II Fackelträger suits, Harold and his Adelburger bodyguards treaded on the ruins of Paradise. At the outskirts, rows of collapsed buildings greeted them. They took positions inside a trench. The bottom of the trench was a mess. Hundreds of empty shell casings lay strewn next to dead IDA soldiers, their blood mixed in with the watery mud.

Walther stood beside Harold. He studied the local scenery with binoculars. The ongoing battle had reduced Paradise to a desolate wasteland. Destroyed houses, massive craters, mangled, disfigured corpses and burnt-out MAFVs were the fixtures of a once affluent suburb. In the distance, he discovered a hill to the north, looming over the area like the Tower of Babel.

Hundreds of yards away, a platoon of IDA sappers was working. With their trucks parked nearby, they cordoned off whole blocks with landmines and concertina wire. Past them was an elaborate maze of trenches defended by regular troops, heavy weapons emplacements and parked MAFVs. The maze converged on a cobblestone road from several directions, the road leading to the base of the hill. A two-story house stood at the summit.

"*Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren*," Walther announced, "Sapienti's Place."

Isolde smiled. "*Ja*, this is the place we've been killing to see."

"Now, it's just a matter of us taking the summit." Lance whistled.

Margaret prayed with her G43 rifle slung over her shoulder.

Chandler gazed at the defenses. "Looks intimidating."

"It's suicidal to charge into that meat grinder head on," Hannelore said.

Harold picked up the telephone from the field radio strapped to Lance's back. On the other end was Drusilla. "We're less than a few minutes away from your position, Wise Man," she informed him.

"About time, Dewy-Princess," Harold said.

Opel Blitz trucks and Hanomag halftracks arrived on the road to the left of their position. Adelburgers of the *Leibgarde* disembarked from the vehicles. Drusilla's Hannibal also arrived, accompanied by a combination of Maurice II/Gs and captured Marcella V/8s.

Harold glanced at the other Adelburgers. "About time they caught up."

"Agreed," chimed Chandler. "What's our plan attack?"

Walther whistled. "Lance, get over here!"

"I'm coming." Lance trudged through the mud, blood and bodies as he moved across the trench. His foot got caught by a body behind Margaret and Isolde's feet, forcing him to trip. A splash of mud dirtied him more than the girls in front of him.

Lance got back up. "What is it, sir?"

"Get fire support on the radio," he commanded.

"Yes sir." Lance picked up the phone and tuned the radio's frequency. "Siegfried to fire support, do you read me, over?" He gave the phone to Walther. "It's for you."

Walther took the phone from him. "Action Andy here, do you read me?"

"Read you loud and clear, Sleipnir," Accardo responded. "Did you call to request fire support?"

"*Naturlich*," he answered, "Requesting rocket artillery barrage at the base of the hill in the center of Paradise. *Feuer frei*."

Less a minute later, a fusillade of unguided incendiary rockets hurled over everyone's head. The rockets rained down on the enemy's positions beyond no man's land. Whole areas were left ablaze. Hapless IDA soldiers and vehicles found themselves in flames. General panic spread among the enemy's ranks. A few unlucky souls deserted their positions, their commanding officers shooting them as they fled to maintain morale.

The flames subsided. Walther scanned the enemy defenses again with his binoculars. Most of the defenders had been barbecued Southern-style. He put away his binoculars and radioed reinforcements from brigade headquarters. "Action Andy," he said into the radio, "Send in the *Leibgarde's* engineers."

An Opel Blitz carrying Ryanite combat engineers traveled along the one-way road. Engineers disembarked once the truck's driver stopped in front of a minefield. With mine detectors, they probed the roads for antipersonnel and antitank mines. Everyone took their time defusing the ones they did find.

"We took care of the mines on this road," the squad leader informed him.

"*Toll*," Walther responded. He fired a flare gun into the air. A bright red flare floated in the air, signaling the beginning of the Adelburgers' attack. "*Vorwärts*, *Vorwärts*, *Leibgarde*!" He motioned them to advance. "That hill won't seize itself!"

His words were clear to everyone. A thousand Adelburgers shouted war cries as Harold and his bodyguards climbed over the trench and dashed across no man's land. Drusilla's Hannibal and the other MAFVs rolled alongside them. They ran past the combat engineers and assaulted the enemy's position head on.

From their fortified positions, the enemy opened fire. On full-auto, IDA infantry fired their rifles, machine gunners pelting the Ryanites with hundreds and hundreds of bullets. Antitank guns hurled shells at the MAFVs.

Bullets and artillery shells rained down on the Ryanites. Dozens were shot as the assault got bogged down. Several MAFVs received direct hits to their hull, knocking them out. A few were set even ablaze by the sustained damage.

In the confusion, separated from the other bodyguards, Chandler and Harold rushed to a shallow crater ahead. Lance, Isolde and Hannelore ran after them, diving into the crater as bullets flew past them. An artillery shell exploded near them, kicking up dirt and shrapnel.

On the main road, Drusilla's Hannibal halted. An IDA antitank shell struck the thick hull. Aside from scratched-up paint, it was active. Several Adelburger rushed past it as the Hannibal's turret turned to the antitank cannon. The turret fired back with precision, destroying the antitank gun.

Through the camera inside the cupola atop the turret, Drusilla saw the smoldering wreck on her headset. Another antitank shell hit the hull, the vibration tingling her body's senses. Her body shook as she moved her head around to move the cupola camera.

A new target presented itself: a machine gun nest. "Gunner," she declared over the radio, "Machine guns!"

"Yes ma'am," the gunner said. "Radio operator, fire your laser gun."

The radio operator manned the Hannibal's hull-mounted laser machine gun. He sprayed a large amount of energy rounds at the machine gun nest. The continuous barrage suppressed the machine gun crew. The Adelburgers continued their assault on the trenches.

Poking his head over the crater, Chandler spotted the enemy machine gun nest. Reaching for the Panzerfaust slung over his shoulder, opened its safety and

squeezed the lever. The warhead landed in the middle of the machine gun nest. The explosion propelled enemy bodies into the air like ragdolls.

As other Adelburgers sprinted past them, Harold motioned at Chandler, Lance, Hannelore and Isolde. "On me!" he shouted.

In an adrenaline rush, they ran with the others and charged at the enemy. Some of the Adelburgers, as they got closer, squeezed a few rounds from their StG44s assault rifles and MP40 submachine guns. Harold and his bodyguards dashed ahead of the Leibgarde.

Two entry points into the trenches appeared. Harold and Chandler ran up the path on their right. Lance and Hannelore followed Isolde as she took the other path. Following in their wake, Walther and Margaret led squads of Adelburgers into the trenches.

"Stay close to me, Chandler!" Harold shouted at the top of his lungs.

Lagging behind the State Chancellor, Chandler sprinted to catch up with him. With him now by his side, Harold ran up to a squad of IDA soldiers from behind. The boys unloaded their magazines on the enemy squad. The soldiers had no time to react. As their bodies slumped to the ground, the boys crouched past them. They stayed behind a nearby corner to catch their breath.

"We…a-are we almost there?" Chandler asked.

"…Got a ways ahead of us…" Harold ripped an empty mag out of his StG44 and inserted a loaded one. "Come on, let's go."

They ran up to a Y-junction full of dead IDAs. The path on their left led to a row of four entrenched IDA Marcella V/8s.

Dweller Marcellas battled an approaching wave of Adelburgers and Maurice IIs. While they made short work of them, the preoccupied crews failed to notice the Couple's presence. No IDA soldiers were around to cover their flanks.

Chandler and Harold crept up to the closest Marcellas and pulled out Safecracker antitank grenades from their satchels. The engines were rumbling upon approaching them. Chandler patted Harold's shoulder and gave him an OK gesture whilst pointing at the sloped rears of the Marcellas.

"Don't worry," Harold said, "I got this." Together, the boys pulled the ignitors off the bottom of the grenades and attached the grenades' magnets to the Marcellas. They did the same to the other two and ran away from the MAFV.

From a safe distance, they watched the Marcellas explode in rapid succession. The engines, caught on fire, ignited the ammo storage compartments like fireworks on Independence Day. The hatches atop the turrets' cupolas popped open, the exploding ammo shooting upward.

With the Marcellas destroyed, they continued navigating the trenches. Towards the end of the maze, they spotted Drusilla's Hannibal with both treads blown out. Though immobile, the weapons were still remained active. A squad of IDA troops with captured Safecracker grenades swarmed the Hannibal.

Harold and Chandler charged against the IDA soldiers, guns blazing.

The Lovers, along with Margaret, Lance, and Hannelore, appeared from the opposite direction. Several Adelburgers accompanied the five bodyguards.

Chandler ducked under the wooden barricade. Harold leaped in midair as Ryanite bullets whirled past him and Chandler, his body landing face first on the soft ground. Reunited with his other *Leibgarde*, Harold wasted the IDAs. Together, they left Drusilla's Hannibal behind and continued the attack.

The enemy retreated from the trenches once the Leibgarde reached the base of the hill. A few IDAs got holed up in a bunker that faced the road leading to the base. From the doorway, a squad of Adelburgers piled up outside the doorway.

The sergeant kicked the metal down. A Ryanite carrying a *Flammenwerfer 41* poured a steady stream of fire through the doorway and stepped backward. Four IDAs fled from inside, their fatigues in flames. The Adelbu squad slaughtered them with Remington 870 shotguns before heading inside.

At the summit, Harold and his friends gathered in front of Sapienti's Place.

But inside, the IDA commandos were dead on the kitchen floor in pools of their own blood. Virgil, his clothes bloodier than those on a serial killer, dropped to his knees and took a deep breath. He looked to his left and saw the Adelburgers approach the summit of the hill.

Harold shouted from outside. "Chandler, kick the door down!"

"Ladies first," Chandler told the girls. At the front door, he struggled to kick down the door. Virgil had barricaded the door with the kitchen table.

With the Leibgarde closing in, Virgil rushed back to the cellar. Entering the cellar, he body-slammed closed the door shut.

Halfrida stood in front of him, her back leaning on the wall. "What's going on outside?" She crossed her arms.

"Ryanites are here," Virgil declared. "They'll be downstairs any second."

"It's about…" A small explosion erupted from upstairs, followed by the tramping of several hobnailed jackboots. "Yup, that's them alright," Halfrida said. The boots grew louder as the Adelburgers got close to the doorway outside the cellar. "Virgil, you may want to move away from the doorway…"

The door swung open, smacking the back of Virgil's head. Virgil, knocked unconscious, slumped to the floor. Chandler, Harold, Margaret, the Lovers, Lance, Hannelore and Drusilla stormed the cellar with guns drawn.

Halfrida greeted them with a wide grin and crossed arms, her back leaning against the wall. "Glad to see brother, godparents and friends again."

They drew their guns away. "Where's the Silent Orphan?" Chandler asked.

She pointed at the unconscious body of Virgil Sapienti, lying on the doorway.

Harold and Halfrida, reunited, embraced each other in front of the others.

Chapter Thirty Three: Never Forget, Pt. III
(Ryanite Chorus; July 30th, 2014)

"This is not Armageddon. Nor can we blasphemously say, 'God will never let this happen.' If and when the bomb is dropped, don't blame God. The choice is ours."

-Bishop Walter Sullivan

As dawn roused her rosy fingers, Halfrida stepped out of her Mercedes-Benz 600 Großer outside her brother's home in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. Clad in her female Bishop Dowell uniform, Halfrida strolled through the dewy grass on the lawn and walked up the steps of the front patio. The Mercedes sped away. Pushing the door buzzer, she waited for her brother to open the door.

The door opened. Her brother stood on the other side of the doorway, dressed in a male Bishop Dowell school uniform.

She cracked a smile. "I'm back from taking everyone to the airport!"

"I can see that," Harold said. "So does this mean Chandler's innocent now?"

"Yes, that's right." Halfrida barged her way through the doorway. Harold closed the door behind her. They walked down a small corridor to the home living room. "Is mom and dad home?"

"Did you forget? Mom and dad are dead," Harold reminded her. "Virgil murdered them during the March 21st Plot."

At the living room, Halfrida twirled and snapped her fingers. "Oh, that's right. Should we leave after this and pay them a visit at the cemetery?"

Harold nodded. "We should, but we need to take care of some housekeeping first, Halfrida."

"Oh, you mean that crazy stuff I've been doing for the past three years?"

"Yeah, especially that part."

Tanja, the twins' pet German shepherd, entered the house through a custom-made doggie door embedded on a door to the backyard. She barked at her other owner, her tail wagging.

Halfrida dropped to her knees and hugged Tanja. "I know I missed you."

Tanja barked again. Halfrida petted Tanja's furry hide. "As always, she behaves with both discipline and grace." She stood upright. "By the way, Harold, have you made any new paintings in your art studio?"

"Well, yeah, before Case Red escalated and fell apart after that mess we caused back at Setonburg and New Hope."

She frowned. "Yeah, and I'm still distraught over the FYC and the PNU siding with the Underground and IDA."

"Get over it, Halfrida." Harold crossed his arms. "It's not like FYC's Francine McAdams or PNU's Andreas Ricci was interested in aiding our cause anyway." He walked across the living room. "Do you need anything from the kitchen before we head to my room?"

"Don't me you mean 'our' room?" Halfrida said.

"Of course, I forgot." Harold smacked his hand against his forehead.

"Let's just head upstairs and get this stuff over with."

The twins went upstairs and entered Harold's bedroom–their bedroom. Harold went for chair at his desk. Halfrida settled for the side of the bed. Both crossed their legs. Sunlight entered the room through the window blinds of two windows.

She surveyed the room's amenities. "Some things never change."

"Everything old is new again."

"Isn't that what Opa Stahlsebastian taught us during our childhood?"

Harold nodded. "Well, yeah, besides shooting things," he added.

"From this moment onward, the Brotzman twins will be forever united." Halfrida stood up and pounded her chest with a clenched fist. "Our quest to make Catholic Education great again begins its next phase." She sat by the bedside. "You remember that book, *Das Rheingold*?"

"I still do. We're going to spread the Republic Program from sea to shining sea. The Dweller World united under the Coalition. And Secret School Economies redistributed for the Common Good. No one will stop us, not even Raynerson and his Underground."

"And neither will Ostara," Halfrida snorted, her eyes squinted.

"Exactly," Harold chimed. "Whatever we say in our bedroom and our smoke-filled office at Plaidstadt is unknown to everyone. But when the moment's right, the disclosure commences."

"Yeah, whenever we're not shooting things." Harold gawked at the briefcase underneath his chair. "By the way, I brought the briefcase on everything to do with the Republic Program." He opened it. Inside was a compositional folder inside a thick, clear plastic bag. She unzipped the bag and pulled the folder out. The words 'Project for a new German Millennium' were emblazoned on the cover, a thick black line obscuring much of the text.

Several documents pertained to all aspects of the GACSS, both the known and the unknown. Everything was written in pain-staking detail, complete with charts, graphs, and photographs. Halfrida grinned as she skimmed through most of the pages before putting them and the folder back in the briefcase. She settled it on the floor beside her feet.

Getting out from his chair, Harold went to retrieve it. Halfrida told him, "Leave it there for now. We need to discuss about our plans."

"Okay, if you say so." Harold returned to his chair. "What is it?"

"As your sister, will you allow me to once again crossdress as you and run the affairs of the Republic Program?"

"How long are we talking?"

"Whenever I see fit. In exchange, I'll let you crossdress as me and frolic in a garden of beautiful teenage girls."

"Which school are we talking?"

"St. Eustace Catholic High School for Girls," she replied, "Where you'll spend senior year with beloved Allison."

Harold's jaw dropped. The thought of attending an all-girl school as a girl crept into his mind. Yet his sister's proposition sounded a little awkward, conjuring up too many questions. "What is this, a Japanese Yuri anime set in an all-girl Catholic school?"

"No, this is the story about making Catholic Education great again and putting Catholic Identity first! At some point, we ought to pay homage to other stories set in Catholic schools!"

Harold cocked his head to the side, confused.

She rambled at the walls in a drunken stupor. "Don't you realize it, Harold? World War II *never ended*: the Not-Sees are alive and well! World War II just got renamed the 'War on Terror', with *Brotzmanskrieg* being the most decisive battle!"

"Are you high right now, Halfrida?" Harold's eyes narrowed.

"So are you!" She blushed, pointing at him. "We both get high at Mass, so what's your problem?"

He sighed. "Have you been taking those Remnants over-the-counter pharmacy tablets with oxycodone, cocaine, and methamphetamine? The Lovers told me that one tablet alone does funny things with your head."

"Oh, it's not like that!" She bounced up and down on the bed. "True Catholics don't rely on the white lab-coated drug lords of IG Farben!"

"Then why are you acting this way?"

"I just went to mass and participated in the Eucharist!" A large smile stretched across Halfrida's face. "Live a life of holiness, boost your stamina and self-esteem. Soon you'll be able to run circles for ninety kilometers without rest while carrying a twenty kilogram backpack!"

Harold laughed. "Sounds like you had tons of fun."

She returned to sitting on the bed, her euphoria rush dissipating. "But anyway, yeah, I need you to frolic in a garden of beauty girls for your dear sister. Try not to bare it all in front of them and show off your raw naked Fascism."

"Why can't we both attend Bishop Dowell with Margaret and her siblings?"

"Be careful. This is centered on Catholic Identity."

"Catholic Identity has become our justification for tons of shady stuff."

"What does that have to do with my offer?"

"It's a risky idea." He placed his hand over his mouth and pondered. "If the girls find out, it's going to be a scandal that Cardinal Wolk and the USCCB will never hear the end of. Our relations with Catholic America ruined."

"Same thing if they figure out that we're at war with the major Great Powers." Halfrida crinkled her nose. "The moment the world finds out about Anomalies and Secret School Economies, a depression in the value of Anomalies *and* rare commodities will occur."

"Are sure that's even going to happen, Halfrida?"

Halfrida nodded. "Anomalies are a source of wealth for the Great Powers, the value of which is backed by gold and oil. Both commodities are plentiful in the Otherworld, but they don't exist in the financial records of any country. If word gets out, what's going to happen to the global value of gold and petroleum?"

"The prices drop."

"Pfft, they won't just drop." Halfrida smacked a clenched fist on Harold's bed. "The prices plummet to the point of worthlessness!"

"Regardless, I'm more concerned over a global panic that the 'Not-Sees' aren't dead yet, and are still alive and well in the Otherworld."

"You mean Lady Ostara's Conspiracy?"

Harold shook his head. "The *HJ-Reste*–the Hitler Youth Remnants of *Neudeutschland*," he clarified.

"Not our problem; leave that to their Prime Minister, Lester von Baumgärtner. Weren't we talking about the crossdressing?"

"Uh, about that…" Harold scratched his scalp. "What's your *raison d'être*?"

"If we're ever going to realize our plans, we better beef up the RGA and gain more allies from abroad."

Harold stroked his chin. "Also, we need to talk about the Confederation and Head Minister Francis Leblanc."

"What about them?"

"With all opposition in the clergy out of the equation, dissolving the Confederation Program should also be in the agenda."

"I have considered that possibility myself." Halfrida gazed at a diocesan map of the US, on the wall above her brother's desk. The map featured every American Diocese and Archdiocese along Republic and Confederation lines. "However, I remain convinced that having a puppet regime is still a wise choice."

Harold shook his head. "Sorry, but I disagree. The Confederation, from the beginning, posed as a roadblock for Republic expansion. Two years ago, a majority of the bishops were skeptical of the Republic's success."

"And that's why they formed the Confederation? Why Nathaniel Hawthorne and Francis Leblanc backed it?"

"That sounds correct. Things have changed while you were away."

"Then we dissolve it, and make Leblanc head of Dweller Coalition. My 2,400mm railway supergun, *Halfrida Brotzman Geschütz,* is to be under my direct command, along with the squadron chosen to protect it."

"I believe I can make those arrangements, dear sister." Harold winked. "After the Confederation's been dealt with, let's host the Second Catholic School International at Plaidstadt from the 7th to the 14th of August."

"We're not having it in Argentina, as the CSI had planned?"

"No, either it's hosted at Plaidstadt, or GACSS leaves CSI. That's our chance to reach out for potential allies and information on Lady Ostara's whereabouts."

"Then again…that's kind of what I wanted…"

"See what I mean?"

Halfrida giggled. "By the way, Harold, aren't you forgetting something?"

Harold tilted his head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"You promised that we'll crossdress after my return. Since I'm back, let's execute these plans with you as me, me as you."

"I knew you wouldn't forget." Harold winked. "Let's roll."

***

(*One day later*)

Chandler got of his chair to stretch his arms and legs. He had been sitting in front of Horst Brotzman's desk for what felt like an eternity. "And that's the whole story of my life up to this point, Herr Brotzman." He cracked his knuckles and sat back on his chair. "The audacious rescue of my beloved Halfrida in the ruins of Setonburg is the icing on the cake."

The rays of the morning sun pierced the window behind Horst. Horst said nothing to him as he dropped a dirty fork, knife, and linen napkin on an empty plate. He set the plate and the teacup and the saucer aside on the tray.

He's been awfully quiet since Fake News began this story, Chandler thought.

The double doors of Horst's office reopened. Miss Langford returned to the office with another silver tray. This new tray had a hot towel roll, a Cuban cigar and a box of matches. She settled it on Horst's desk.

Horst grinned at his personal maid. "Fräulein Langford…"

"Shall I light your cigar?" Miss Langford spoke in a deadpan tone.

"Jawohl." Horst took the cigar from the other tray and tucked it between his lips. Miss Langford ignited the match and lit his cigar for him.

Sweat drooped down Chandler's forehead. Anxiety festered within him. *Did I do something wrong, why isn't he responding to me?* He fidgeted whilst seated, his fingers tapping on the chair's armrests.

Miss Langford took the old tray and walked out of the office. Someone in the hallway outside closed the doors for her. Chandler never had a chance to see who closed them.

Horst exhaled tobacco smoke through his nostrils. He jammed and grinded the lit end of his cigar against an ashtray on his desk.

This is taking too long, I need to speak up! Chandler cleared his throat. "Uh, Herr Brotzman," he told him, "I hope that my story is more than enough to curry favors with you *and* marry Halfrida."

"*Naturlich*," he said, "I appreciate your patience. Are you still listening?"

Chandler nodded. *This is it.* He crossed his fingers and closed his eyes.

"You, along with your peers and the twins, have proven yourselves to be worthy of my arsenal." Horst pointed at him. "Your testimony was all the proof that I need to make my final decision."

Wait, is that true? Chandler opened his eyes. "Do you mean that, sir?"

"Who says that I dishonor my word? Never forget, you can always trust everything that comes out of my mouth. Do I myself clear?"

Chandler nodded. *I guess that counts as a 'yes'.*

"Then I'll make it official." He opened his drawer, retrieved a white envelope, and tossed it at his desk. "Give that envelope to Harold or Halfrida, whichever you come across first."

"Why one and not both?"

"Both will find out soon enough."

"I see." Chandler got up and reached for the envelope on the desk.

At the last second, Horst snatched the envelope away from him. "Before I give this to you, I have something else to inform you."

Chandler cocked his head to the side. "There's more?" He returned to his chair. "What is it?"

"Listen carefully, because I will say this once." Horst unrolled the hot towel on the tray. He scrubbed every inch of his hands and wrists. "You're a good kid, Chandler, an example to my own grandchildren. I would have given you the keys to my family's vast coffers if you were my son or eldest grandson."

"Thank you, sir." Chandler bowed his head.

"But because you are not either, you don't have my sympathies at all." Horst dropped the hot towel on the tray. "First of all, feel free to take Halfrida's hand in marriage–you've earned it. If God convinces you otherwise, you are welcome to continue your discernment into the priesthood."

Leaning forward, Chandler smirked. *Go on.*

Horst hacked and coughed. "No matter what happens, all I ask from you and the twins is an end to Brotzmanskrieg. Reaffirm my family's alliance with Bauers; conquer the Underground; terminate Lady Ostara. That is all." He stared into Chandler's gray eyes. "What is your answer?"

"It shall be done."

"That's what I want to hear." Horst tossed the envelope on the desk again.

Chandler got up and grabbed it.

"When this is all over, come back to the estate," Horst said. "I'll find a place for you and Halfrida to raise a family."

"I'll keep in touch." Chandler swaggered out of Horst's office.

Appendix: Glossary

ACP: Anomaly Causing Phenomena. Like their Anomaly counterparts, they defy conventional scientific logic. Regardless, all ACPs have one thing in common: they are hazardous to living humans and wildlife.

Adelburgers: The elite assault troops of the RGA. Led by former NPEA Rakonitz (q.v.) student Walther Schäffer, they are a highly-motivated, multi-national taskforce of young Catholics. This term is sometimes contracted as 'Adelbu', and the meaning remains the same nonetheless.

Anomaly: Refers to the natural resources of the Otherworld. Borderline magical in qualities, Anomalies are formed when metallic objects (mostly steel) react with an ACP. Thousands of Anomalies exist with their own parent ACP.

A-Wing: Short for "Aerodyne-Wing," this is a loose translation of "*Luftgeschwader*" (q.v.), the term used to denote all miniature warplanes.

Bauer Industries: A North American industrial conglomerate, and Canada's most influential company in industrial applications. Ran by the Bauer family, it maintains good relations with the Republic Program (q.v.).

Bluebloods: Sometimes called "Old Dwellers," these Dwellers are Nordic-looking humans with the bodies of teenagers. Though they appear similar to humans, their biology slightly differs. Unlike Moles (q.v.), Bluebloods are the native inhabitants of the Dweller World.

Brotzmanskrieg: German for "Brotzman's War", the term denotes the overriding conflict of *Fame and Honor* and its sequels. The conflict revolves around three things: the liberation of American Catholic schools and Secret School Economies (q.v.) occupied by other Great Powers (q.v.); the breakup of the Underground's monopoly over the Anomalies; and the destruction of tyrannical regimes that rule the Dweller World, the IDPs (q.v.) and the PNU (q.v.).

Brotzmanstab: German for "Brotzman Staff". It was a think-tank known only to a select few within Adolf Hitler's government, including the ϟϟ (q.v.).

Catholic Education: Depending on the context, there are two definitions. In general, it represents an education centered on the Roman Catholic worldview. But when spoken as "American Catholic Education," it is used to refer to the educational affairs of Catholicism.

Catholic School Conservationism: An ideology stressing the preservation and the advancement of Catholic Education within the United States. After the Rebirth (q.v.), it later morphed into the RGA (q.v.) and the GACSS (q.v.).

Catholic School International: Sponsored by Bauer Industries, this is a Catholic school United Nations, where inter-school system diplomacy is conducted among students from over thirty countries.

Civil Guard: School prefects, tasked with regulating the student bodies. Trusted and relied upon by their school principals, they keep their peers in line, relieving the disciplinary workload from the teachers.

Coalition: Of the several regimes ruling the Dweller World during *Brotzmanskrieg*, this one upholds pro-Catholic interests. As a result, it receives aid and support from the Greater American Catholic School System (q.v.) and its allies.

Commissary Commandant: A student who operates a Catholic school's store. They are responsible for the sale of Republic and Confederation products.

Confederation Program: Another variation of the Republic program that was started by the Southeastern and eventually, Southwestern Dioceses and Archdioceses of the United States. Led by Chief Head Director Francis Leblanc, the Confederation's ruling body is the Parliament.

Conspiracy: A shadowy Far Right cabal that rose to prominence after the Rosy War. Matilde 'Ostara' Geralyn von Brandt is the alleged leader of this outfit. Her 'Conspiracy' seeks to destabilize the GACSS (q.v.), Neudeutschland (q.v.), and the Underground (q.v.) through acts of terrorism.

Cross Financial Unlimited: An American-based financial institution with ties to the Bauer Family. This was also the instrument that financed the covert activities of the *Brotzmanstab* both during and shortly after World War II.

DDM: Dawning Day Motors. A Jackbooter business in Wonderland, DDM is well-renowned among Ryanites for its production of MAFVs (q.v.) and A-Wings.

D-VIII: Droge-VIII; German for "Drug Eight". An experimental drug produced by the Brotzmanstab, with assistance from IG Farben (q.v.) and another Third Reich organization. In the decades following the War, D-VIII was rediscovered and became a financing mechanism for the Conspiracy.

Dweller: A loose term denoting two different sets of people living below North America, Bluebloods (q.v.) and Moles (q.v.). The general space in which they inhabit is referred to as the "Dweller World."

Eastern Hares: The predominant religion of the Dweller people, specifically, the 'Old Dwellers' or 'Bluebloods'.

EWTN: Eternal Word Television Network. Founded by the late Mother Mary Angelica, PCPA, it was created on August 15th, 1981 as a television network dedicated to Catholic programming.

Fackelträger: "Torch Bearer" in German. It refers to the advanced personal armor system used by RGA ground units in *Brotzmanskrieg*. A Catholic school uniform imbued with the effects of Anomalies, it creates an energy field around the user's body, providing them with protection from bullets and energy blasts.

FCIMS: Federal Computerized Information Management System. Computer software developed and later deployed by the Reagan administration during the 1980s to allow all US government agencies, administrations, and departments to share information from a single database. The software was also riddled with too many backdoors, allowing anyone with access to it via SuperEngima.exe (q.v.) to exploit them and ride into the US government's computer networks.

FORESIGHT: The life work of Philadelphia's Johannes Cardinal Wolk before His Eminence pursued the priesthood in 1964. In the 1950s and 1960s, Cardinal Wolk was a nuclear engineer trying to continue earlier development on a nuclear-powered propulsion engine for the Brotzman family. The project itself stemmed the Brotzmanstab, who in turn acquired it during the Weimar years. Both Cardinal Wolk and the Brotzmans found unsatisfactory results, forcing them to cancel the project indefinitely. After the Rosy War, Ostara stole the old documents from the Brotzmans, and used it to finish an experimental Remnants A-Wing.

GACSS: Greater American Catholic School System. The formal term used to refer to American Catholic Education after the events of the Rebirth (q.v.). It is divided into two sectors: the Republic and the Confederation. The characters pronounce it as "Gacks" in their conversations.

Great Powers: Refers to the factional interests that rule over the SSEs (q.v.), the Dweller World and the Otherworld (q.v.). Most trace their origins back to the formations of the first SSEs during seventies and eighties, which coincided with access to the Dweller World and Otherworld.

Harrisburg Incident: A "Columbine-style Reichstag Fire," the Incident refers to a summer school shooting that occurred in late June 2012. To date, it is the second worst school shooting and second worst terrorist attack in recent US history, second only to the March 21st Plot (q.v).

IDA: Independent Dweller Army. The IDA is the combined armed forces of all Dweller cities outside the Communist "People's Northwestern Union." During Brotzmanskrieg, it was allied with the Conspiracy, and as a result, the Underground.

IDP: Independent Dweller Party. The Dweller World is divided into six separate nations. The first is the Communist Dwellers of the People's Northwestern Union. Four Dweller nations, many of them neighbors of the PNU, are absolute monarchies. The vast majority of Dwellers are subjects of the Independent Dwellers, a Dweller nation that claims to practice democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. In reality, organized crime and corruption is rampant within the Independent Dwellers, with a mafia don as Prime Minister being one example.

IG Farben: A corporate merger of six petro-chemical and pharmaceutical companies, the company is notorious for its wartime activities with the Third Reich. The Brotzmans, because of their ϟϟ connections, were major shareholders. After the War, from 1952-2012, the company underwent a process of liquidation.

Imperial Palace: A deep-underground complex in Otherworld, located near Other-Boston, Eden. This is the political, organizational, military, and economic nerve center of the Catholic School Underground. Emperor Bernard Raynerson and other prominent family members manage the day-to-day activities there.

Jackbooter: A person who sells goods and services on the Secret School Economies. The term later became synonymous with the Plaid Prohibition (q.v.) and is a pun on the word "Bootlegger."

Kamerad: German word for "Comrade." It entered the lexicon of the average American Catholic School student after 2012. The word itself is sometimes used to address another student.

Luftgeschwader: The German term to refer to "Aerodyne-Wing," otherwise called 'A-Wings'. They form the air forces of the Great Powers.

MAFV: Miniaturized Armored Fighting Vehicle. Acting as smaller, remote-controlled substitutes for conventional armor, the MAFV form the armored forces of the Great Powers.

Magic Eye: An experimental Remnants A-Wing intended for long-range aerial reconnaissance. Developed during the Rosy War, it was one of numerous research projects that failed to reach the prototype and production phases. The airframe, though unconventional, was a deliberate design choice: it was designed to deceive the ignorant into believing it was a UFO.

March 21st Plot: The underhanded *coup-d'etat* aimed at assassinating the leadership behind the Programs and bring GACSS under Conspiracy control.

Milchpalast: German for "Milk Palace" or "Milk Hall," this Philadelphia hangout sport was geared toward teenagers and young adults since the 1920s.

Moles: Known as "New Dwellers," Moles are orphans, runaways and throwaway youths who sought shelter and asylum in the Dweller World. Unlike the Bluebloods, they are as human as everyone else on Earth's surface.

Mothers Den: The holy city of the Eastern Hares.

Neudeutschland: German for "New Germany," this country is home to over two hundred million Remnants (q.v.). Its current landmass is two-thirds the size of "Southland," Otherworld's South America.

NPEA: *Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten*; German for "National Political Institutes of Education." Otherwise known as 'Napola', the NPEA was an ϟϟ-controlled school system that educated the Third Reich's future leaders.

NPEA Rakonitz: A Catholic boarding school based out of a medieval castle in the former Czechoslovakia. It was run by clergy, religious and officers in ϟϟ uniforms. In reality, it housed the secret headquarters of the Brotzmanstab, where they designed and developed secret weapons known as "Wunderwaffen."

Otherworld: An alternate dimension that is very similar to the universe that the Earth occupies. To date, the term refers to an Earth-like locale that is an exact duplicate of the real Earth. The Great Powers have a formal presence there because of the Anomalies.

Plaidfahne: German for "Plaid Banner," this is an important relic reflecting the vigor of the Rebirth. While beyond the scope of *Fame and Honor* story, its significance and symbolism are important to *The Plaid Dream*.

Plaid Prohibition: The result of the Kohler Act, which led to a general ban on sugary and salty junk food in American public, private and charter schools. There's a lot of money to be made, and potential markets to be tapped. While not the focus of *Fame and Honor* or *The Plaid Dream*, it plays a huge role in the events of the novel, *The Dawning Day*.

Plaidstadt: Formerly Cardinal McDougal High School, it was opened and operated by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia until its closure in 2009. Three years later, it is the administrative building for the Republic Program.

Rebirth: A term denoting the six months of events that resulted in the establishment of the Republic (q.v.) by the USCCB (q.v.) as a 'non-profit support apparatus.'

Rebirth Waters: Another term for the 'Waters of Rebirth' (q.v.).

Remnants: Officially 'Die HJ-Reste' or 'The Hitler Youth Remnants', they are a sizeable group of former Hitler Youth and BDM members who escaped the Third

Reich by fleeing to the Otherworld. Led by the former student body of NPEA Rakonitz, they are technologically and financially powerful.

Republic Program: By definition, the term refers to the organizational entity that came into existence in the wake of the Rebirth. Led by State Chancellor Harold Brotzman, the Republic Program's ruling body is the Convention. Alternatively, the term can also refer to the book of the same name, which is an English translation of the Rheingold (q.v.).

RGA: *Ryanischen für ein Großkatholische Ausbildung*; German for "Ryanites for a Greater Catholic Education." Backed by former elements of the *Brotzmanstab*, they are the pro-Catholic school forces in the ongoing *Brotzmanskrieg* conflict.

Rheingold: A book written by Father Michael Agrioli, SJ, a Jesuit priest forced to work for the Brotzmanstab on a teleporter called the Nornen-Gerät or "Nornir Device." This book would go on to form the basis of the Republic Program.

Rosy War: The conflict that preceded Brotzmanskrieg. From 1997-2005, an alliance of various powers led by the Underground declared war against the Remnants. Despite superior equipment, the Remnants lost. Many events in *The Plaid Dream*, such as *Brotzmanskrieg*, are rooted in this conflict.

Ryanite (plural term for Ryanite is "Ryanites"): Slang term used to denote students of American Catholic schools. Though slowly, the word gained prominence among students, becoming a household name. In some cases, it can also denote students of the Canadian Catholic School System. In German, the word is known as 'Ryanisch'.

Ryanite Chorus: In *The Plaid Dream*, a chapter bearing the words 'Ryanite Chorus' means that *all* the main characters make a physical appearance within a chapter.

Ryanite-Dweller Border: Otherwise referred to as simply the "Border," the Ryanite-Dweller Border was comprised of three caverns that divided Wonderland and Schwarzenstein from the Dweller World. Bedrock Mills, a sleepy town east of Underworld, is an important border town known for being close to Checkpoint Able, occupying the central cavern.

SCHLEDGEHAMMER: The original codename for a prototype 3,200mm railway artillery supergun that the Remnants used in the closing days of the Rosy War. It was later dismantled by its armaments manufacturer responsible after the conflict, pursuing elaborate steps to continue the research such as shortening the barrel to 2,400mm. The project was later acquired by Halfrida Brotzman, who went on to finish it, renaming it "*Halfrida Brotzman's Gun*."

Schwarzenstein: German for "Black Stone", it is the headquarters of the RGA.

Setonburg: An important Dweller city on the western bank of the Waters of Rebirth. It plays a huge role in the events of *The Plaid Dream*.

SSE: Secret School Economy. It denotes the clandestine financial apparatus that exists within every school system, including the GACSS. Anomalies, in addition to other goods and services, are sold by students known as "Jackbooters."

ϟϟ: *Schutzstaffel*; German for "Protection Squad." They act as the paramilitary, intelligence gathering, and secret police force of Adolf Hitler and his party. As an organization, it is heavily compartmentalized with an alphabet soup of lesser groups.

TCR: Telepathic Chat Relay. A prototype headset developed by the Remnants during the Rosy War. As its name suggests, it allows wireless communications between the user and another individual through Telepathy. Usage was derived from research on the Anomalies of the Otherworld. Research discontinued due to the Rosy War, but like other projects, it continued under Ostara's watch.

Tree Caviar: An important food and cash crop among the Dwellers, both Moles and Bluebloods alike. The fungus grows off of the bark of trees, resembling the texture of actual caviar, hence its name. Can be found on Earth's surface, but sightings are rare. Thanks to Lady Ostara, Tree Caviar has become an important ingredient in the production of D-VIII.

Underground (aka 'Catholic School Underground' or 'CSU'): An American youth movement driven toward the New Evangelization and the Anomaly Phenomenon. Though many members were homeschooled, the Underground exercised its influence over various school systems and colleges. But infighting among its ranks caused it to lose the country's Catholic schools to the RGA.

USCCB: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Formed in 1966, this is the national assembly of Catholic clergymen and religious that runs the pastoral affairs of Catholic life in the United States.

Volksarmee: German for "People's Army." This is the Ryanite Home Army, responsible for defending the internal boundaries of the GACSS.

War, the: Although war is a common theme, this term exclusively refers to World War II, because of its main characters possessing former ties to the German Reich.

Waters of Rebirth: A large cavernous body of water that divides the Dweller world in half. Hundreds of miles wide, thousands of miles long, the only way to cross it is by boat. A number of major Dweller cities are situated along this important region.